Readings of Wittgenstein’s On Certainty

Edited by
Danièle Moyal-Sharrock and
William H. Brenner
Readings of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*
Also by Danièle Moyal-Sharrock
UNDERSTANDING WITTGENSTEIN’S ON CERTAINTY
THE THIRD WITTGENSTEIN: The Post-Investigations Works

Also by William H. Brenner
ELEMENTS OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY
LOGIC AND PHILOSOPHY: An Integrated Introduction
WITTGENSTEIN’S PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS
Readings of Wittgenstein’s
On Certainty

Edited by

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We dedicate this volume to G.H. von Wright and İlham Dilman, who again and again found the liberating words
Much seems to be fixed ... Perhaps it was once disputed. But perhaps, for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts.

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# List of Abbreviations of Works by Wittgenstein

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>CE</td>
<td>‘Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness’ (1937); ‘Appendix A: Immediately Aware of the Cause’ (1937–38); ‘Appendix B: Can We Know Anything but Data?’ (1938). In <em>PO</em>, 371–426.</td>
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Introduction

In a paper entitled ‘Certainty’, Norman Malcolm speaks of the creation and reception of Wittgenstein’s last work:1

Wittgenstein's last notebooks, published under the title On Certainty, were written in the final year and a half of his life. They are rough notes, completely unrevised. They are his discussions with himself, with no anticipation of publication. ... Many readers find the whole thing bewildering. But these notes reward hard study. Not only are there individual comments of great beauty, but also lines of thought emerge that are not to be found elsewhere in Wittgenstein’s writings. (1986, 201)

Here, Malcolm evokes the two facets of On Certainty: its roughness and its brilliance – indeed, On Certainty is an unpolished gem. Whatever is responsible for the roughness – be it the circumstances of composition, the vicissitudes of philosophizing, deliberate method, or all three – there is no doubt that On Certainty is a work of beauty and originality, whose reverberation is only just beginning to reach us.

For Malcolm’s appraisal did not draw hosts of scholars to the hard study of On Certainty. A handful of excellent book-length works on On Certainty have paved the way,2 but for the last ten years, the way has remained virtually untrodden. Wittgenstein studies have been fixated on Philosophical Investigations and the Tractatus; if On Certainty was alluded to, it was with distance and deference. Deference, for even upon a first reading one intuits the gem; and distance, because the gem is bewildering. Recently, more scholars are persisting through the bewilderment, and are reaping the rewards. There is now a dawning acknowledgement that Wittgenstein was the author of three, not two great works: On Certainty is Wittgenstein’s third masterpiece. This, the
first collection of essays devoted to *On Certainty* attests to this rising wave. Our hope is that it will also nourish it.

The increasing interest in *On Certainty* has manifested itself in efforts at understanding (1) the work itself; (2) its place in Wittgenstein’s philosophy; (3) its relevance for philosophy in general, and epistemology in particular. Exegesis has been mainly concerned with the proper characterization of the so-called ‘hinge propositions’ which owe their name to Wittgenstein’s metaphor for our basic beliefs as the hinges on which the door of our epistemic inquiries turns (OC 341, 343). Does Wittgenstein think of these ‘hinges’ as empirical propositions or expressions of grammatical rules? Are they presuppositions, assumptions, tacit beliefs or expressions of our ways of acting? Should the basic, animal certainty Wittgenstein strains to describe be seen as a subjective certainty, an objective certainty, a collective certainty? Is it a kind of warrant, belief, trust or faith? Are all of these options incompatible? *On Certainty* has also been scrutinized to determine whether its famed images and metaphors draw a foundationalist picture of our basic beliefs, and here, we see that there has been as much resistance to accepting the foundational connotations of reaching ‘bedrock’ or ‘rock bottom’, of supportive ‘foundation-walls’, of enabling ‘hinges’ and ‘scaffolding’, of a basic ‘substratum’, as there has been effort at delineating them.

‘Placing’ *On Certainty* in the Wittgensteinian corpus has been another focus of interest: assessing the degree to which it is continuous (or not) with Wittgenstein’s earlier work. Does *On Certainty* show Wittgenstein addressing new problems, finding new solutions to old problems, or simply doing more of the same – where ‘doing more of the same’ can mean either: proposing similar solutions to the same problems or going on pinpointing problems in an effort at dissolution, not solution? Whatever the answer we favour, this new focus on Wittgenstein’s last masterpiece cannot but increase our understanding of his philosophy as a whole: commentators can now look backwards from *On Certainty* and direct fresh thinking onto some of the earlier works; they can also look forward – to the work’s future resonance.

The relevance of *On Certainty* for epistemology has been seen mainly in Wittgenstein’s critical treatment of scepticism, and in particular Moore’s response to it. Wittgenstein’s *grammatical* response to scepticism has prompted a distinction in the literature between the ‘solution’ and ‘dissolution’ of sceptical problems – the latter, further analysed and refined by Michael Williams into antisceptical strategies whose diagnosis is either *therapeutic* or *theoretical* (1991, 1999a). Related epistemic questions about *On Certainty* have been whether Wittgenstein uncovers in it a new
kind of foundationalism, or indeed of coherentism, or an odd mixture of both; and whether this newfangled ‘foundherentism’ might be the long-awaited answer to the regress that has plagued all accounts of basic beliefs. But epistemology is only just beginning to mine the plethora of riches in *On Certainty*: we need to delve further into the nature of its foundationalism, and that requires more probing into its depiction of the noncognitive, pragmatic nature of basic beliefs. Also, *On Certainty*’s deproblematization of scepticism has not yet been fully appreciated – whilst Wittgenstein’s response to Moore has been heeded, his corrective to Descartes still beckons: ‘A doubt without an end is not even a doubt’ (OC 625). In order to exorcise all our sceptical demons, Wittgenstein’s categorial distinctions between knowledge and certainty, doubt and doubt-behaviour, doubt and obsessive doubt, mistake and aberration, uncertainty and madness must be further distilled. This volume is intended to take us a step further in the process.

To help readers come to terms with the diversity of views being generated in the new focus on *On Certainty*, this collection has been divided into four ‘readings’: the ‘Framework reading’ gathers chapters that either expound or critically examine foundational and grammatical views of *On Certainty*; the ‘Transcendental reading’ offers neo-Kantian and neo-Realist interpretations of the work; the ‘Epistemic reading’ examines the epistemic versus nonepistemic nature of the certainty in question; finally, the ‘Therapeutic reading’ approaches *On Certainty* in the spirit of ‘New Wittgenstein’ commentators, nudging us away from framework and transcendental readings, and towards a less theoretical, more dialectical and open-textured interpretation of Wittgenstein’s aims.

The readings in this volume reflect current competing interpretations of *On Certainty*. In doing so, they invite the question of how there could be such perplexingly divergent responses to the same work. The immediate answer might be to point the finger at Wittgenstein: he is, after all, a difficult writer, and the fact that *On Certainty* is made up of unpolished, and (probably) unfinished notes, compounds that difficulty. A more pondered answer might be that, in spite of appearances, the responses are not that divergent; that, in fact, one would need simply effect something like a terminological switch and make, say, ‘transcendental’ interchangeable with ‘grammatical’, and watch the Framework and the Transcendental readings collapse into one. If enough care is taken to define ‘transcendental’ as sufficiently distinct from the Platonic or Fregean idea of a third (human-independent) realm, there may be room for reconciliation. Indeed, if we pay close attention to our Transcendental readers, we see that the term ‘transcendental’ is much
more down-to-earth than we might have assumed. As Howard Mounce emphasizes: ‘Classical metaphysics ... is not, as is vulgarly supposed, an attempt to transcend the human condition by attaining an external standpoint. It is an attempt to illuminate that condition by making explicit what is only implicit in the condition itself.’ For Anthony Rudd, Wittgenstein’s method of seeking a perspicuous presentation of our linguistic and other practices is a transcendental enterprise in that it searches for conditions of possibility, but it does so within our practices themselves. This ‘primacy of practice’ is also emphasized by William Brenner who sees Wittgenstein parting company from Kant in his rejection of the idea that the logic of a proposition is to be traced to ‘something inner’ such as the a priori structure of the understanding; for Wittgenstein, logic – the transcendental features of language and thought – is inseparable from use. When the search for ‘conditions of possibility’ is indistinguishable from the elucidation of the ‘conditions of sense’, and when those are internally connected with our practice, the difference between ‘transcendental’ and ‘grammatical’ all but evaporates.

But then the question arises as to whether the Therapeutic reading can be at all reconciled with the others. One of the radical themes of this reading is that postulating, however ephemerally, some ‘rock bottom’ of thought and action – whether ‘transcendental’ or ‘grammatical’ – is to have strayed too far already. For the Therapeutic reader, Wittgenstein’s talk of conditions, foundations and scaffoldings is, like talk of ladders, something which we should regard as either emetic or homeopathic – either something we swallow in order to ruminate and reject it; or a sufficient dose of the poison to cure us of the poison.

Perhaps a better way of accounting for the variegated readings of On Certainty which this volume brings together would be to put these readings on a single continuum – one end of which is more attuned to a traditional understanding of objectivity; the other not at all attuned to objectivity. Perhaps the happy medium is the point at which we all concur that where Wittgenstein speaks of our basic beliefs, our primitive certainties, the conditions of thought, he is speaking of our conditions and of our thoughts; that, for Wittgenstein, the only acceptable objectivity is – to borrow a phrase from David Wiggins – objectivity, humanly speaking. Or, as Cora Diamond might put it: logic, yes, but with a human face:

Wittgenstein wanted us to see that the grammar of atemporality has application in a life which looks like this and this and this; that is, he shows us life with definitions that fix meaning, life with
formulations of rules that do (in an unmysterious sense) contain all
their applications. If we do not see him as drawing attention to the face
of necessity, the face of life with logic ... [w]e shall miss altogether the
kind of philosophical criticism in which he was engaged. (1991, 6–7)

Once it is agreed that where it is Wittgenstein’s philosophy we are
talking about, any talk of logic, grammar or objectivity is internally linked
to our human ways of acting and thinking – that the logical, here, is nec-
essarily *anthropo*logical – much of the perplexing divergence in reading *On
Certainty* is attenuated. But not all. It still remains to be explained, for
example, what some of us mean by *conditions of thought* or *of sense.*
Therapeutic readers suggest that invoking *conditions* of sense or *rules* of
grammar implies that meaning is *fixed in advance of use.* And so where
then is the primacy of practice that is so keenly proclaimed? The question
is valid, however, only if the expression ‘fixed in advance of use’ precludes
the primacy of practice, *which it need not do.* To speak of rules of grammar
being formulated, or bounds of sense being demarcated, is simply to say
that limits, that are *already there, in use,* are being made more perspicuous.
To speak of bounds of sense or grammatical rules is perfectly in keeping
with seeking a more perspicuous view and a more perspicuous *presentation*
of something that is already there in ordinary language: ‘We make
our moves in the realm of the grammar of our ordinary language, and this
grammar is already there’ (WVC 183). To say that the correct use of our
words is fixed in advance of use does not imply that it is *independent* of
use, but that there is a grammar that can be appealed to, which we have
fixed *in use* (though in advance of *that particular use*) – in an *unconcerted
consensus,* not a concerted agreement – and which is indispensable to the
use, transmission and evolution of language. What is meant by rules of
grammar or conditions of thought is simply something like: ‘We call
this a table’, and if you call it ‘a chair’, you are using the word incor-
correctly or idiosyncratically. As Jeff Coulter puts it: ‘Grammar is *normative:*
what people may actually say is, of course, up to them. But what they
then *mean* by whatever they say (if anything) is not solely up to them to
say’ (1999, 147). To speak of rules of grammar, conditions of thought, or
definitions that ‘fix meaning’ (Diamond in the passage above) is not to
say that meaning is fixed in a third realm, or that the conditions of
thought are static or independent of context. This is the gist of
Wittgenstein’s river bed metaphor:

*The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a
kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and*
the game can be played purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.

[...]

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.

[...]

And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited. (OC 95, 97, 99)

In these passages, Wittgenstein is describing our basic certainties as constituting a mythology – which is to say that our basic beliefs are not empirical or scientific conclusions we come to about the world, but that they function like the rules underpinning our world picture and our language-games. This mythology, he suggests, is not static; the rules – that is, the conditions, or scaffolding, or hinges, or hard rock of our thoughts: our basic certainties – change. This does not, however, make them any less rules or conditions for all that – ‘If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put’ (OC 343) – it only suggests that these rules are not absolute; that they are conditioned (though not justified) by certain facts (OC 617). Grammar remains autonomous, but still human-bound.11

Another thing these passages evince is that Wittgenstein’s answers are not always transparent. The aim of this volume is to lessen the opacity of some of Wittgenstein’s answers, to make his presentations of certainty, knowledge, objectivity, scepticism, more perspicuous still. It is time that On Certainty came into the limelight not only of Wittgenstein studies, but also of current epistemological inquiry – for only then can it be the object of discussion, debate and discord. And only then, can it show its true mettle.

We now introduce the chapters that make up this volume.

D.Z. Phillips’s ‘The Case of the Missing Propositions’ is a dramatic monologue. It relates the unbroken reflections of an individual on what he considers Wittgenstein’s main concern in On Certainty. Inspired by Phillips’s editing of Rush Rhees’ notes on On Certainty (Rhees 2003), this monologue evokes and works through the thoughts and problems prompted by the work with a kind of intelligent naiveté that is symptomatic of the best philosophizing. Its apparent simplicity does more to iron out the questions prompted by any first encounter with
the work than any sophisticated examination would. The speaker’s contemplation of various answers to the problems posed are the implicit occasion for a tour d’horizon of early commentary on On Certainty, but the commanding perspective remains that of Rhees. The conclusion, therefore, is that the certainty Wittgenstein is giving an account of is a sureness found in our ways of thinking and acting: we act in certain ways and certain facts are simply not questioned. All realist – naturalist or non-naturalist – attempts to justify our ways of acting, or to explain them as ‘emerging from’ anything better known and more basic, are rejected.

The framework reading

In ‘Why On Certainty Matters’, Avrum Stroll claims that On Certainty is the most important contribution to epistemology since Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, and outlines its major achievements – which are to have shown that knowledge and certainty are not mental states, and differ intrinsically; and that certainty is to be identified with a background which is exempt from the ascription of any epistemic properties, such as being true or false, known or not known, etc. In defending this last view, Stroll introduces the notion of ‘negational absurdity’, according to which the possibility of radical scepticism, as a challenge to such a background, is seen to be pathological or absurd.

In ‘Why Wittgenstein Isn’t a Foundationalist’, Michael Williams identifies four features of the traditional conception of epistemological foundations: universality, specifiability, autonomy and rational adequacy. He argues that Wittgenstein is committed to none of these, and that he is therefore improperly labelled a foundationalist. According to Wittgenstein, our certainties need not be universal (count as basic for everybody), or theoretically specifiable as basic or non-basic. Nor do our basic certainties either constitute an autonomous, logically independent stratum, or provide (as foundationalists have traditionally hoped) a basis for the rational resolution of all disputes. Since rational resolution or justification is something that we do ‘always already’ within some up-and-running epistemic practice, we fail to make sense when we try to raise or answer questions of justification in the global, decontextualized, abstract matter of the philosophical sceptic and his traditional opponent. For Wittgenstein, Williams explains, the exempting of some judgements from doubt plays an essential meaning-constituting role in our language game. Such judgements are basic certainties, however, only to the extent that they are treated, in practice, as such – and not
because they have any of the features suggested either by foundationalism or by its rival, the coherence theory.

Wittgenstein’s use of both foundationalist and coherentist images in his delineation of our ‘system of beliefs’ has been the subject of some discussion. In ‘Within a System’, Joachim Schulte addresses the apparent incompatibility of the positions evoked by these images. He sees a way out of the incompatibility by considering the different images (scaffolding, riverbed, hinges, axis of rotation) as applying to different kinds of propositions. Propositions conveying basic rules or information can be compared to hinges, while sentences expressing commonplaces are more like axes of rotation. The latter do not surface at all in normal circumstances; they are like certain gestures or exclamations used to bring home to people that this is how things work.

In ‘Unravelling Certainty’, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock also addresses, from a different perspective, the apparent incompatibility of the various images used by Wittgenstein in his efforts to uncover the nature of our basic beliefs. He speaks of them as propositions, as rules, as forming a picture, and as ways of acting, and although the propositional option is rejected, we are left to ponder how certainty can be a way of acting, an unfounded belief and a rule of grammar. It is suggested that the seeming incoherence partly evaporates when we realise that there is an attitude/object ambiguity here: although he does not explicitly distinguish between the two, Wittgenstein is in fact describing objective certainty and objective certainties. Moreover, his elucidation of objective certainty is itself effected from two different perspectives: a phenomenological one, from which he describes what it is like to be objectively certain; and a categorial one from which he seeks to determine the doxastic status of objective certainty. Moyal-Sharrock concludes that objective certainty is a kind of belief-in whose occurrence resembles a flawless know-how. Finally, in order to account for the ‘ineffability’ of a certainty which can nevertheless be formulated (in grammatical rules), it is suggested that a distinction be made between saying and speaking.

The transcendental reading

It is widely denied that Wittgenstein’s philosophy is realist. According to many, his views cannot be so classified in that he ‘dissolved’ the whole dispute between realism and anti-realism. In ‘Wittgenstein and Classical Realism’, H.O. Mounce aims to show that this view is mistaken. He begins by giving a short account of the dispute between realism and anti-realism.
as it occurred in traditional philosophy or metaphysics. The dispute concerned the relation between mind and world: according to one party, the mind is formed by the order of the world; according to the other, the order we find in the world is largely a projection of the human mind. Mounce then argues that the assimilation of Wittgenstein to anti-realism is based on the tendency on the part of Wittgensteinians – and here, Mounce singles out Alice Crary and Cora Diamond – to rely on what he considers a spurious dichotomy: either we can transcend language and ground it in the world, or our language is wholly autonomous. The resulting assumption being that because we cannot transcend language, language is not grounded in the world at all. A third possibility – that language develops through our interrelations with an independent world is not considered. This is the position of the classical realist, who holds that the grounds of our language depend not on our own reasoning but on our fundamental relations with the world. In this, suggests Mounce, Wittgenstein is a realist. The rest of the chapter is devoted to the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy which, after the *Tractatus*, is often treated as a single block. Here again, Mounce argues that this is a mistake, that there are radical differences between Wittgenstein's views in the early 1930s and in his last writings. In the early 1930s, Wittgenstein's views might be described as verificationist or anti-realist. At this time, he embraced a sharp distinction between concept and fact: a statement is true or false only within a framework of concepts. The last writings are radically different. The distinction between concept and fact, in its earlier form, is abandoned. Moreover, there is a repeated emphasis on the dependence of language on natural, prelinguistic reactions. Wittgenstein's mature view, according to Mounce, is that it is only through such reactions that language has its sense. Language is an extension of our natural relations to the world; therefore, its order logically presupposes the order of nature. In this respect, and especially in *On Certainty*, Mounce sees Wittgenstein as returning to the tradition of classical realism.

In ‘Wittgenstein’s “Kantian Solution”, ’ William Brenner aims partly to clarify and develop remarks by Stanley Cavell and other commentators on the ‘Kantian strain’ in Wittgenstein, and partly to counter Howard Mounce’s challenging Realist interpretation of Wittgenstein’s mature philosophy. Brenner argues that Wittgenstein’s Kantianism consists primarily in his rejection of any Realist, that is, ‘transcendental realist’ justification of our concepts. He discusses two contrary forms of transcendent realism, represented by the Hylas and Philonous of Berkeley’s *Dialogues*. Hylas and Philonous disagree not over the truth of commonsense propositions (of the sort Wittgenstein investigates in *On Certainty*)
but over their correct analysis. Wittgenstein’s ‘Kantian’ approach is to locate the sense of the propositions analysed in the propositions themselves, rather than in other, supposedly more fundamental propositions. Where Wittgenstein parts company from Kant, however, is in his rejection of the idea that the logic of a proposition, its possibility of truth or falsity, is to be traced to ‘something inner’ such as ‘the \textit{a priori} structure of the understanding’. For Wittgenstein, logic – that is, transcendental features of language and thought – is inseparable from ‘outer’ normative contexts of use: ‘You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it’ (OC 501).

Anthony Rudd’s chapter, ‘Wittgenstein, Global Scepticism, and the Primacy of Practice’ begins by defining global scepticism as a doubt, not about particular empirical facts, but about the ultimate ontological status of such facts. Although Wittgenstein says relatively little about this in \textit{On Certainty}, that little, Rudd thinks, suggests an argument based on the fundamental principle of his later thought: the association of meaning and use. The argument being that if the dispute between, for example, realists and idealists about the ultimate ontological status of things is not ‘manifestable’ in practice, then it is empty, indeed unintelligible. The upshot of this dismissal, suggests Rudd, is much the same as that of the sceptic’s dismissal: it returns us to our ordinary linguistic practices while abandoning any attempt to ground them in a supposedly deeper metaphysics. Moreover, Rudd finds that the argument is inadequate in two ways. First, usage is much more flexible than dogmatic ordinary language philosophers have supposed, and so it may be that there are contexts (though perhaps not very ‘ordinary’) where what is at stake between realists, idealists and sceptics is manifested in practice. Second, we need to ask what the status is of the manifestation requirement itself, or, more broadly, the idea of the primacy of practice, which seems to play a central role in \textit{On Certainty}. Is it a philosophical thesis of some kind? And if it is, why should the sceptic feel obliged to accept it? And wouldn’t it conflict with the supposedly anti-theoretical thrust of Wittgenstein’s philosophy? Rudd concludes that the idea (or thesis) of the primacy of practice has a transcendental status whose defence would require that Wittgenstein be committed to a stance Rudd calls ‘transcendental pragmatism’ – an essentially Kantian transcendentalism. It is finally suggested that a detailed articulation of the kind of position presupposed by Wittgenstein can be found in Heidegger’s \textit{Being and Time}. If Wittgenstein is right that meaning is bound up with usage and activity of various kinds, then language-users must be agents engaged with entities distinct from themselves – beings-in-the-world, as Heidegger has
it. It follows from this that there are certain beliefs about ourselves that we cannot revise – such as: that we are agents and that we are bound by and able to respond to norms of rationality and meaning.

**The epistemic reading**

According to Thomas Morawetz, one of the most seductive traps for the novice philosopher is to draw the following inference: from the methodological insight that perennial philosophical topics, such as the concept of knowledge, may be usefully addressed by examining speech acts, such as claims to know, to infer that there is a one-to-one relationship between having knowledge and being in a position to claim, ‘I know …’. The assumption is readily made that whenever one has knowledge, one may appropriately claim to know. In ‘The Contexts of Knowing’, Morawetz shows that, in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein makes clear how seriously wrong that assumption is; that knowledge includes a great many things which, while shown in our conduct, we normally have no occasion to assert – things such as ‘I have two hands’, for which we can imagine giving corroborating grounds only in abnormal contexts. As Morawetz reads him, Wittgenstein thought that Moore’s mistake consisted in countering the sceptical challenge with a knowledge-claim. A less misleading response would have been: doing something with his hands while saying, ‘Here I act with a certainty that knows no doubt.’

In ‘Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* and Contemporary Anti-Scepticism’, Duncan Pritchard examines the relevance of *On Certainty* to the contemporary debate regarding the problem of radical scepticism. He begins by considering two accounts in the recent literature which have seen in Wittgenstein’s remarks on ‘hinge’ propositions the basis for a primarily epistemological anti-sceptical thesis: the inferential contextualism offered by Michael Williams and the ‘unearned warrant’ thesis defended by Crispin Wright. Both positions are shown to be problematic, as interpretations of Wittgenstein and as anti-sceptical theses. The problem with these accounts, from a textual point of view, is twofold. The first is that they share a common assumption about hinge ‘propositions’ – that Wittgenstein held they really are propositions – which, Pritchard argues, is highly contentious. Even if one is willing to grant this assumption, however, a second problem remains, which is that on a reading of *On Certainty* that has Wittgenstein advancing a primarily epistemological thesis, there is in fact strong evidence to suggest that Wittgenstein thought that no epistemic response to the sceptic was available – at best, it seems, only a pragmatic anti-sceptical thesis is on offer.
Michael Kober finds it a striking, though undoubtedly puzzling fact that Wittgenstein from the Notebooks 1914–1918 to On Certainty inclusively relates knowledge and certainty to religion and mythology. In his paper, ‘“In the beginning was the deed”: Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Religion’, Kober explains why, and why it matters to us. He begins by summarizing Wittgenstein’s view of objective certainty in terms of the underlying constitutive rules of our epistemic practices, but also sees Wittgenstein, in On Certainty, to be describing a subjective certainty – that is, the particular attitude of any person who knows and acts. This prompts Kober to re-examine the influence on Wittgenstein of William James’ The Varieties of Religious Experience. He finds Wittgenstein’s thematizing of religion to be in terms, not of true or false beliefs, but of a stance which a person adopts towards her natural and social environment, as well as towards herself. Kober makes a rapprochement between this religious stance and our ordinary epistemic stance, which consists in taking certain things for granted and others for impossible. Such a stance resembles a mood in that it can be expressed via epistemic avowals; is neither true nor false; and requires no justification. In this conception of a religious stance towards the world, Kober sees Wittgenstein as providing a new interpretation of epistemic certainty.

The therapeutic reading

In his chapter ‘On Wittgenstein’s Response to Scepticism’, Edward Minar contends that despite their fragmentary and incomplete nature, the notes comprising Wittgenstein’s On Certainty represent a systematic and powerful response to sceptical doubts about our knowledge of the external world – if only we learn how properly to read them. We misread insofar as we expect to find Wittgenstein offering a theoretical account of certainty that, by accurately reflecting the grammar of our practices of inquiry, will demonstrate the nonsense of the sceptic’s demand for a global justification of the very possibility of knowledge. In looking for this kind of account, we would seek to unearth the hidden structure of justification which would reveal where the grounds and limits of knowledge really lie, showing the sceptic to be wrong about these matters. Wittgenstein’s real purpose in On Certainty is both simpler and more radical. Reminding us of what we actually say and do, he aims to provoke the sceptic to account for his sense that there is something amiss in our cognitive dealings with the world. The hope is that the sceptic will no longer find his doubt natural, let alone obligatory. More specifically, Minar suggests that the sceptic, his dogmatic opponents who insist that
his doubts can be directly removed, and those who seek an ironclad demonstration that his doubts are meaningless, all operate with a determinate notion of the proposition, on which each candidate for rational belief carries with it a way of fixing, for all possible contexts, what would count as relevant doubts as to its justifiability. Wittgenstein adamantly opposes this picture of meaning. When, under its sway, we read *On Certainty* as proposing that the sceptic has mistaken the real structure of empirical propositions, and thereby we have prematurely conceded the possibility of a detached perspective from which the rationality and intelligibility of our practices ‘as a whole’ could be surveyed. Minar engages us in a more dialectical, less theoretical, way of reading *On Certainty* – one in which the sceptic and his Moorean, ‘common sense’ opponents are gradually prodded to put their commitments into words, with the intent that the emerging depiction of the debate will show that its terms, its representations of our lives as knowers, are costlier than or in any case different from what its protagonists had envisioned.

In ‘Wittgenstein and Ethics’, Alice Crary uses *On Certainty* to flesh out her contention that Wittgenstein’s failure to make a traditional contribution to ethics is an indication, not of his disengagement from ethical concerns, but of his unorthodox expression of them. Wittgenstein makes many of his most explicit remarks on ethical topics amidst his philosophical investigations of other (seemingly non-ethical) topics. This makes an appreciation of these remarks inseparable from an examination of the topics in which they are embedded. Following her own cue, Crary examines what Wittgenstein says about meaning in *On Certainty*. She suggests that most discussion about Wittgensteinian ethics presupposes ‘inviolability interpretations’ of meaning, according to which our linguistic practices – more specifically, our ‘framework judgments’ – are immune to rational criticism or assessment. This, she argues, leads to relativism and turns on mistakenly trying to distinguish kinds of nonsense. Crary’s aim is to remove this influential interpretation (as particularly exemplified in Marie McGinn’s work) in favour of one that shows the ethical outlook as implicit in our being language-users at all.

‘Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it’ (OC 501). In ‘“The First Shall Be Last and the Last Shall Be First ...”: a new reading of OC 501’, Rupert Read interprets this passage as a plain indication of the continuity of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. But is it perhaps an indication that *On Certainty* is continuous with the *Tractatus* (construed after the ‘ineffabilist’ interpretation of Anscombe, Hacker, and others) and not with *Philosophical Investigations*?
Read suggests rather that, in his last writings, Wittgenstein comes to recognise more explicitly the continuities between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* and *On Certainty*. Read does this by experimenting with two apparently opposed readings of OC 501, and attempting to place them both in the context of the relatively new ‘resolute’ and ‘therapeutic’ reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophizing championed by James Conant, Cora Diamond, Juliet Floyd and Warren Goldfarb. His aim is to show that OC 501, read in context, evinces that, at the last, Wittgenstein was endeavouring to philosophize in a resolute fashion, as he had more or less done throughout – and very largely succeeding.

**Notes**

1. Any hesitation about calling *On Certainty* a ‘work’ must also apply to *Philosophical Investigations* – indeed, it must apply to all works published under Wittgenstein’s name with the exception of the *Tractatus*.


3. Symptomatically, in their Introduction to *Wittgenstein’s Lasting Significance*, the editors, Max Köbel and Bernhard Weiss note their surprise that ‘*Philosophical Investigations*, which […] it is fair to say, has predominated work on Wittgenstein was pushed into the background’ by their contributors, and replaced by a focus on the *Tractatus* and on *On Certainty*, thus revealing ‘an interesting facet of our current engagement with [Wittgenstein’s] work’ (2004, 1).

4. For occurrences of these images, see OC 498, 248, 341, 211, 162. Such resistance can be found in the works of D.Z. Phillips, Michael Williams and in their contributions to this volume, as well as in those of Edward Minar, Alice Crary and Rupert Read; but see also Read’s ‘Throwing away “the bedrock” ’ in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105:1 (September 2004), 81–98.


6. This term was coined by Susan Haack (in *Evidence & Enquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology*, Blackwell, 1993); I borrow the term but not Haack’s definition of it.

8. See the anthology edited by Alice Crary and Rupert Read (2000), two contributors to the present volume.

9. In his ‘Recent Interpretations of the Transcendental’, Sami Pihlström shows ‘how transcendental inquiries can be rearticulated in a pragmatist context’: taking Kantianism as the historical source of transcendental philosophy, he argues that Wittgensteinianism is a kind of ‘linguistified Kantianism’, and that pragmatism is a kind of naturalized synthesis of these (2003, 291). See also John McDowell’s use of the word transcendental ‘to characterize any philosophical thinking whose aim is that there is not a mystery in the very idea of objective purport’ (1998, 365 n2).


11. In *Culture & Value*, Wittgenstein makes clear that he is not opposed to bounds of sense or objective standpoints, for that ‘only means that we are taking up a position right outside, so as to be able to see things more objectively’; but only to thinking of such bounds and objectivity as absolute or not humanly determined: ‘What I am opposed to is the concept of some ideal exactitude given us *a priori*, as it were. At different times we have different ideals of exactitude; and none of them is supreme’ (CV 37; my emphasis).

A word of explanation is necessary about the form of my chapter. It is written as the unbroken reflections of an individual on what he takes to be Wittgenstein’s main concern in *On Certainty*. The reflections go through many stages, but the outcome is meant to be the best overall reading of *On Certainty* that that individual thinks can be reached. That reading cannot be applied to every proposition Wittgenstein discussed in that work. But Wittgenstein said that the propositions he was interested in do not form a class, and that the same thing cannot be said of them all. The overall reading settled for, is meant to do justice to Wittgenstein’s major philosophical concerns.

The oddity of the chapter is this: it contains, in its text, no mention of Wittgenstein, of *On Certainty*, or of Rush Rhees. Yet the reflections in the chapter derive solely from editing Rhees’ notes on *On Certainty*, and is, for the most part, no more than an outline of his argument, together with the contrasts I noted in an afterword between that argument and other readings of the work.¹ The notes at the end of the chapter indicate these numerous borrowings, but I recommend that the chapter is read through, initially, without consulting them. My main concern is with the course of the argument.

It has been said that one of the achievements of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, is to get us to look at our world in a new way; a way which is often impeded by our philosophisings. I think this is true. I also believe that among readers of Wittgenstein, Rush Rhees helps us more than anyone else to show us what that way of looking at the world amounts to. With that much of an explanation, let us turn to the individual’s reflections.
I feel rather amazed when I’m asked questions like: how do I know what my name is; that the earth has existed a long time before my birth; that I have two hands; how I know when I’m sitting near a familiar tree in my garden, that that’s a tree; whether I know that I’ve never been to the moon; that water boils at a 100°C (who tipped him off about my weakness for that kind of thing?); that water in a kettle over a gas flame boils and does not freeze; that I flew from London to California a few days ago.2

I feel, sometimes, that my questioners must be mad, but they tell me not to worry on that score – that they’re only doing philosophy.3 I feel uneasy. Why should anyone play such a game? Just to show how clever they are? I know that’s a compliment philosophers often pay each other – he or she is so clever – but should it be? Wouldn’t ‘he or she is so puzzled’ be better? But should I be puzzled about the questions I’ve been asked? After all, isn’t the answer to all of them so obvious? Of course I know all these things. Don’t we all?

Of course, I can think of circumstances in which I do know the things I’m asked about, and where saying that I do would be perfectly natural. I can say, ‘I know that that’s a tree’ to reassure a blind person, or to reassure the passengers I’m driving in a fog. A survivor of a horrendous explosion may check to see whether he has two hands, whereas this would be absurd in normal circumstances. But then I realize that my philosophical questioners are not interested in circumstances such as these. So there is no point in multiplying these.4 They want me to concentrate on circumstances where I want to say I could not possibly be mistaken. They ask me whether my sureness is due to the fact that I know these things are true. I know they have something up their sleeves, but since I want to see what it is, anyway, I’ll reply in the way I know they want me to: Yes, I do know these things which are beyond the possibility of a mistake.

I should have known better. Now I have to say how I know these things. How do I know that that’s a human being? How do I know that that’s a chair? How do I know that I’m standing and not sitting down? And I don’t know where to go. I’m not being asked how I know these things in unfavourable circumstances, but in ideal circumstances. It’s because I already have the best case that I don’t know where else to go. I’m supposed to find a proposition which will justify even that. I can’t prove that I have two hands by raising one hand after the other, because if I am supposed to doubt their existence, why should I believe my eyes? I might just as well ask a friend.5

So I’m in a fix. I want to say that I know these things, but I’m not allowed to because I cannot say how I know. But perhaps there’s a
way out. Perhaps the proposition ‘I know that that’s a tree’ makes perfectly good sense, but that it simply cannot be said in the ‘best case’ circumstances we are discussing. I feel rather pleased with my discovery: the discovery of a distinction between word-meaning and speaker-meaning.6 Alas, my pleasure is short-lived. The response to my discovery is devastating. So I have a proposition that would have a sense, if, \textit{per impossible}, I’d be able to say it.\textsuperscript{7} That now seems to be a dead-end, because what sort of proposition is it that has a sense, but can’t be used?6

But surely I’m not called to give up all those propositions. They seem so obvious and, what is more, necessary. If I don’t know that that’s a tree, even when I’m looking at it, what the devil do I know? It seems such a basic knowledge, the support or foundation, one might say, for so much else that I claim to know. So it’s no good substituting ‘believe’, ‘assume’, ‘trust’ or ‘take for granted’ as epistemic alternatives for ‘know’.\textsuperscript{8} Not only would they expose me to the same question, ‘Why do you believe, assume, trust or take these things for granted?’ – They would also leave me with a new set of propositions which are supposed to make sense when confronted with the best case, but which can never be said!

But then I even have a cleverer idea. I’m faced with the problem that these foundational propositions cannot be said, but perhaps that’s the kind of propositions they are – propositions which cannot be said. We can even give them a name: let’s call them framework propositions, or hinge propositions. The reason why you do not assert these propositions is that they are the framework for the propositions that we do assert. A certain peace descends on my mind. I’ve made a second discovery. A better one this time: the discovery of a distinction between framework propositions and other propositions.\textsuperscript{9} Alas, the peace like my former pleasure, doesn’t last long: I seem to be going in circles. Why are framework propositions important? Because they are framework propositions. But worse: isn’t the devastating criticism still with me? I have framework propositions which I can’t use, but which have sense nevertheless. A proposition which has sense, but no use!\textsuperscript{10} Don’t I admit that that leaves me with empty words? I’m trying to say that there are propositions on which everything depends, that underlie the whole of discourse, and yet that they can’t be used. But propositions which have no use have no sense. Alright, I admit it. I thought I was saying something when, in fact, I was not. The reason why I can’t find my missing propositions is because my conception of those propositions is confused.

So why not settle for that? Why not be glad that philosophy has rescued me from nonsense? Isn’t that all philosophy can do for me? Isn’t it essentially a therapeutic technique which rescues me in the way
described? Wasn’t I suffering from a mental cramp from which I’ve been relieved? Wasn’t I like a fly trapped in a bottle which has been shown the way out? So now, cramp free and trap free, why don’t I fly away and not bother with such matters any more? After all, we’re only doing philosophy.\(^{11}\)

I can’t do it. I feel cheated. I always feel cheated when people talk like this, even though one may come dangerously close to speaking in that way oneself.\(^ {12}\) What of philosophy’s big question? What of the nature of reality? Isn’t philosophy supposed to be concerned with that? And when I was asked whether I knew all those things that seem so obvious, I felt, and still feel like saying, ‘If I don’t know these things, I don’t know anything at all.’ Aren’t those philosophers right who say that unless I know these things, I lose the whole world?\(^ {13}\) Don’t I need to know, desperately need to know, whether these things tally with the facts; with how the world really is? And that is why the therapeutic conception of philosophy seems so thin by comparison.

On the other hand, I admit that I am in a mess. The propositions I need seem to be missing. I can give no intelligible account of them. I hang on to a last possibility: perhaps my knowledge that the earth has existed for a long time, that I have two hands, is not asserted in a series of propositions. It is a kind of implicit or tacit knowledge.\(^ {14}\) The trouble with this, however, is that it suggests propositions which have a shadowy or ghostly presence. And the same objection haunts me: so you now have shadow propositions which have a sense, but no use! A shadowy presence doesn’t make me any less vulnerable to the objection than a real presence would.\(^ {15}\) And I can’t fall back on the previous claim that the propositions aren’t expressed because they are so flamingly obvious, or I’ll be asked how I know that they’re so flamingly obvious. I feel so sure about the truth of these propositions, but I know that won’t do. We are not dealing with psychological issues, but logical issues. How I feel has nothing to do with it. We are enquiring into the sense of things.

I want to take these objections on the chin, but I’m left looking for my missing propositions, explicit or implicit, propositions which will show me that I am in touch with the world. I realise that that is what is at stake: the sense of our being in the world. And my propositions have brought me to a dead end. Let me illustrate this with reference to a proposition, said by me now, ‘I am standing, not sitting’. If I say that this proposition is true, it seems to follow that I can say, now, ‘I am sitting down, not standing, is false’. And that implies that if I say, ‘I am sitting not standing’, you would, at least, understand what I am saying. But if I actually said that, you wouldn’t be able to do anything with my
words. I wouldn’t be like someone who had made a mistake.\textsuperscript{16} You’d wonder whether I understood the words at all.

Furthermore, suppose you wanted to show me that when I say, ‘I am standing, not sitting’, this is true, tallies with the facts, how are you going to show this? We are back to our problem.\textsuperscript{17} No proposition that I assert seems able to do so. In my example, I seem to have reached bedrock, but no proposition can express it. I may be confused, but recognizing that is not enough. I won’t settle for therapy. Despite my missing propositions, I want to keep asking my questions: Does our discourse tally with the facts? Am I in touch with reality? Am I in the world?

My problem seems to be this: I am sure I have two hands, I’m sure I’m standing not sitting, I’m sure I’m talking now to other people. But I can’t find a propositional way of asserting my sureness. The propositions are missing.

But wait a minute. I also admitted that I have reached this point due to confusion. What if I have been looking in the wrong direction? Maybe the trouble is not that the propositions are missing, but that they were never there in the first place. The sureness I’m trying to capture may not be a propositional matter at all. My sureness may be of another kind. It may be akin to an animal certainty.\textsuperscript{18} There is a use of the verb ‘believe’ that I’m already acquainted with. I say that the cat believes that I am about to put milk in her saucer. I say that a dog believes its master is at the door. But in neither case do I think that these animals are asserting anything. So there are primitive, non-linguistic expressions of belief which do not involve anything propositional. We are animals along with other animals. What is possible for them is certainly possible for us.

Of course, our human form of life is different from anything animals engage in, but did it not emerge from pre-linguistic, instinctive behaviour? We move instinctively towards someone in pain, we turn and look if someone taps us on the shoulder, we react to colours without choice, we have characteristic gestures of elation and dejection. The things I do not question, that I am standing now, not sitting, for example, may be part of this unquestioning animal certainty. That is why these things are never said, and why no propositions can express them. Propositions come later. Our language emerged from our instinctive, primitive behaviour. Once again, I’m tempted to be content with this, but I have a nigging doubt. To what extent does this pre-linguistic situation throw light on my linguistic situation?

The more I think about this question, I seem to have achieved far less than I thought.\textsuperscript{19} I had turned away from language to seek a solution to my problems in instinctive behaviour. Perhaps I need to go back to language. Why?
When I begin thinking of primitive reactions more carefully, I realize that I identify them as ‘primitive’ from the already existing vantage point of a speaker of a language. For example, take our reactions to colours. If we remain with minimal reactions, one may say that these are shared with certain animals. But if we are to see these as a prototype of thought, how far does this take us? Consider the various ways in which discernment concerning colours enter our lives. I don’t mean the aesthetic judgements in art, important though they are, but simple discernment, as when someone, in choosing colours from a tailor’s book of samples, says, ‘No. That’s too dark. No. That’s too loud.’ These discernments have sense in a culture, and it is not at all clear what is meant by saying that that culture emerged from instinctive behaviour. That is like asking how discussion emerged from it. Instinctive reactions are prototypes of thought only in the context of discourse.

Again, consider the way in which we move towards someone in pain. That movement may not be the result of reason, but it is a prototype of thought in a context in which one is concerned to help the one in pain, where one can criticize those who are indifferent, where one can discuss whether certain pain-reactions are exaggerated, shamming, and so on. Again, a dog may bark when it smells escaping fumes, but a causal reaction to the fumes would involve doing something about them, tracing the trouble, and so on. It’s like saying, ‘That’s to blame.’ The reaction of the dog is not taken up into this kind of concern. That is why it is not a prototype of thought.

It may be that language did not emerge from reasoning. Does that mean that we must say it emerged from instinct? Does it make sense to ask what language emerged from? What kind of explanation are we looking for?

I can see, of course, that were certain instinctive reactions different, some of our activities would not have the character that they do. But that is post-eventum. What I do not see is how those activities had to emerge from those reactions. After all, the reference to ‘emergence’ was meant to explain just that. It seems to depend on a view of the primitive reactions as primary signs which, of themselves, determine how they are to be taken, how they are to be taken in one way rather than another. But it is not the sign, or the primary gesture, which determines the ‘and so on’ – how it is taken up. Rather, it is how it is taken up – the ‘and so on’, which shows the place of the instinctive reactions in our ways of acting.

It is tempting to assume that if a person was left on a desert island before he learnt a language, we would be able to communicate with the person via certain gestures – perhaps the universal gestures of mankind. Trading
on our present use of pointing, I might assume that if we landed on the island, and I pointed to my mouth while chewing food, the islander would know immediately that I wanted to be fed. But why should I assume that? He might attack me, run away, feed me once, but not a second time, and so on. Of course, we can give a history of how our activities developed, but that does not explain that history. If we are tempted to think that we had to have the activities we do, we need only to imagine different primitive reactions to imagine how different activities might have developed. But in none of this are we trading in hypotheses. We are simply commenting on concept-formation, and showing that one cannot demonstrate how that formation is determined by instinctive behaviour.

So I am back with my problem. How do I account for the sureness in our ways of acting and thinking? I’m still faced with the task of showing how this sureness is to be expressed in assertoric utterances. These propositions are still missing. It seems that they are not to be found within the working-contexts of language. But where else are they to be found?

How about this? I seem to be concerned with a sureness, with matters that do not arise, within various human activities. Those activities are not isolated. They take place within the wider context of a community. Perhaps I am not looking for propositions, but the presuppositions of our practices. That is why they are not expressed in assertoric utterances. Couldn’t the community be the presupposition we are talking about?20 After all, there could not be the practices without the community. But as soon as I say this, I realize that I can just as well say that you can’t have the community without the practices. We are going round in circles. But there may be something in the reference to community, even if it’s not what I’m reflecting on here.

On the other hand, even if I drop the notion of community, I need not drop the notion of a presupposition. In fact, it seems to be what I’m looking for: presuppositions capture the sureness in my activities, and yet are not asserted. Consider an example. I am being driven along by you in your car. As I talk to you, don’t I presuppose that you are a human being, and that I’m in your car?

I’m getting nearer the core of the matter, I think, but this talk of presuppositions doesn’t quite hit the nail on the head. Given the course of our discussion, we should appreciate some of the reasons why. Am I not still faced with the confused notion of a proposition which has a meaning, but no use? Consider the example again. As I talk to you, I am supposed to be presupposing the truth of the proposition, ‘This is a human being.’ As I am driven along, I am supposed to be presupposing the truth of the proposition, ‘This is a car.’ But these propositions are
not asserted. If I say I know they are true, I’ll be asked how I know. We are back with all the logical objections we’ve already fallen foul of.

Apart from this, talk of presuppositions intellectualizes the sureness in our activities. The same would be true if, instead of saying I presuppose that you are a human being, or that this is a car, I said that I believed, assumed, trusted or took for granted that you are a human being, and that this is a car. The trouble has come from the mislocation of the sureness in our ways of thinking and acting. I think I see now that what I am trying to give an account of when I speak of this sureness, is not the presuppositions of our ways of thinking and acting, but a sureness found in our ways of thinking and acting. We act in certain ways, and certain facts are simply not questioned. It isn’t that they cannot be questioned, but that they are not questioned. And if you ask what rules them out, the answer is: our practices.

Let us consider some examples. If I am talking to you. I’m not presupposing, assuming or taking for granted that you are a human being. That question simply does not arise. The issue isn’t even formulated. Yet, if this matter were questioned, it would undermine what we mean by communication and discourse with each other. If you ask what holds together the sureness of my sense of the human, the answer is: the way we talk and react to each other. We can see how this inverts architectural foundationalism. It is not that our relationships are based on the truth of the proposition ‘This is a human being.’ Rather, our sense of the human is held fast by our relationships. If someone asked how I knew I am talking to a human being in the circumstances I have described, we would be extremely puzzled. We’d wonder what he wanted to know.

I have talked of things which are ruled out, of doubts which do not arise, in our ways of acting. If I had said they cannot arise, you might have asked, What’s stopping us? But there is nothing stopping us. The point is that we do not do it, and wouldn’t recognize what a person is up to if he tried. It isn’t enough to say we doubt something – our behaviour must show it. And that is precisely what the behaviour of the philosophical sceptic does now show. That is why, when we get the sceptic to realise this, we have not refused the scepticism. We haven’t shown what we do know when he claims we do not. Rather, we show that his doubts are not real doubts. But this is not negative. If we have done our task well, we show him, at the same time, the sureness in our world.²¹

You may be puzzled by the following feature of my argument. I have said that certain matters do not arise, but don’t I contradict myself in telling you what they are. But it is philosophers who formulate these matters in propositions, and we have seen their fate. But to refer
in my argument to issues which do not arise is not, of course, to raise those issues.

Even our conclusions can still be expressed in misleading ways. Our ways of acting, too, have certain features which we do not question. These make up a certain world-picture. The misleading way of expressing the matter is to say that we act as we do because of our world-picture. Rather, we should say: acting as we do is our world-picture. Scientists are not enabled to conduct their experiments by their world-picture. Conducting their experiments in the ways they do is their world-picture.22 If someone were to question these, we wouldn’t know what to make of him. For example, suppose someone claims to have been on the moon. We ask him how he got there. He replies that he doesn’t know how he got to the moon, but that once he gets there, he knows this. We could make nothing of him. He talks of travelling to the moon, but thinks the question of how he gets there is irrelevant. That places him outside our world-picture.

Again, think of the investigations into the age and shape of the earth. But no one enquires into whether the earth existed a hundred years ago. That is not something we are taught, but which we swallow down with what we are taught. We would make nothing of someone who said that we should investigate whether the earth existed a hundred years ago. If someone said that, or if someone said that although he had got to the moon, questions of how he got there are irrelevant, we would wonder what world he was living in.

Am I saying, now, that our practices must be what they are because the world has a certain structure which determines this? No, I am not trying to establish anything; not trying to establish the right picture of the world. That is a very different conception of philosophy from the one I think I’m trying to get clear about. In fact, it is a superstition to think that we must think and act in the ways we do. Neither the world, nor anything we might call human nature, determines these. Our ways of thinking are unpredictable. One might say that they are there – neither reasonable nor unreasonable – like our life. We would no more show that our practices emerge from our natures, than we could show that they emerged from instinctive behaviour.23

If we think that the world forces us to have a scientific interest in it, we need only think of people who have no science. Perhaps they consult oracles. Are they wrong to do that? One may want to combat their practices. But that is to try to persuade them to adopt our practices. If we succeed, it will have been a case of initiation, rather than correction.
At this point, I can imagine charges of relativism being made, as though the aim were to say that all world-views are equal, or that everyone is entitled to their world-views, or some such thesis. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are dealing throughout, it seems to me, with issues concerning language and reality. The notion of ‘the right world-picture’ is itself a confused one.

It is tempting to say that we can show the oracle-consulters are wrong compared with our use of physics. They won’t be able to solve our problems. But they don’t have our problems. Maybe we don’t have theirs either. We cannot settle the matter by saying that unless the world were structured in a certain way, we couldn’t obtain our scientific results. This adds nothing to saying that if we conduct scientific experiments, we’ll get such-and-such results. What science tells us about reality is what scientists find out.24 Neither will it do to say that unless the earth were very old, history would be impossible, since the interest in the age of the earth is itself a historical interest.25 Before this conception of history was brought by the Conquistadors, the Incas lived in what they called ‘sacred time’. Are they guilty of a historical error? Obviously not. What happened to them is that they were initiated into a different conception of time.

None of this means that a world-view is a matter of choice. We cannot doubt at will. Neither can we choose the ways in which we think at will. The suggestion that the notion of community is involved in some important way has something to it after all. The various activities I have mentioned make up what I have called a world-picture. Suppose we ask what is the relation of these activities to the world-picture? That is a misleading way of putting the question. It gives the impression that the problem is one of transition – how to get from the activities to the world-picture, as though the activities are atomistic and self-contained. The real point that I see now has to be made, is that the activities themselves, simply by being human activities have bearings on each other in innumerable ways. It would never do, for example, to say that an order given on a building site by one builder to another could be the whole of a language. The order, and the response to it, can’t be understood merely as a signal which evokes a response. It is an order, understood as such. It comes in the course of a day’s work, in an activity which itself has a meaning. Something is being built. There can be discussion about progress, delay and snags in the work, depending on what that something is. These can be discussed, too, when the day’s work is done, not only on the way home from work, but away from it on the hearth. The worker can be asked by friends how his job is going. What the job is, the satisfaction to be found in it, for example, itself depends on social
movements, economic events, which, in one sense, are far removed from it. In short, the activities we engage in, the language we speak, takes place in the course of the lives we lead. It happens at a certain time and place.\textsuperscript{26}

So it is not a matter of how activities relate to a world-picture. The bearings activities have on one another is constitutive of what we mean by a world-picture. But if we ask what these bearings are, no general answer can be given. That depends on the state of the culture at any given time. It cannot be prescribed by philosophy.\textsuperscript{27} As we have seen, there may be, at any given time, radical distance between one culture and another in this respect. These differences, despite the conclusions I’ve reached, may still lead me so easily into misunderstanding, and to minimise the relation between language and our lives.

What I mean is this: it is sometimes said by anthropologists, sociologists and others, when faced, say, by a people who consult oracles and have no physics, that they employ different categories from ourselves. This talk of employing categories gives a misleadingly, external account of our involvement in language. It makes sense to speak of physicists switching categories for purposes of their own; switching, let us say, from corpuscular to wave theories of light. But one cannot speak of science itself as a category we employ for certain purposes. Still less can we speak in this way of language. Analogies can mislead us here. To distinguish between forms of discourse, we may compare them with different tools in a tool-box, each with its different use. But we do not use language in that sense. We are not linguistic technicians. This is to ignore the internal relations between language and our lives.

This point is connected with other ways in which the conclusions I have arrived at can be misunderstood. In these conclusions, I’ve come to see my being in the world in a new way, a way obscured so often by philosophy. I have come to see that there is nothing over and above our activities which determines the course they take, or the bearings they have on each other. They go as they do. To say they \textit{had} to go that way is something I see, clearer then ever, as a philosophical superstition. But when I see others reach what they take to be similar conclusions, they seek to appropriate them in ways which show that they have not appreciated how radical these conclusions are. This happens, I believe, when people, not only philosophers, try to create an ethic from the conclusions I have reached.

It is obvious that these conclusions are opposed to any notion of metaphysical transcendence, but, in the hands of some, this is turned either into the story of the terror or the triumph of secular humanism. We are on our own, we are told, bereft of any help from a supernatural
order. Naturalism has no room for supernaturalism. We are alone, afraid, in a world we never made. My aim is not to oppose that view of human life, but to show that it cannot be grounded, philosophically, in the conclusions I have reached. My conclusions, so far from dethroning God, ask us to look to religious contexts to see what belief in a transcendent God comes to. In other words, one cannot go from conclusions about the demise of metaphysical transcendence to conclusions about the demise of religious transcendence. This is not the place to argue about the latter, one way or the other, but it is the place to point out that one would have to address the question of whether metaphysical notions of transcendence ever did justice to notions of religious transcendence. It may be that forging a link between them was not a marriage made in heaven, but a confusion made on earth.

A further attempt to derive an ethic from my conclusions is connected with the previous point. It is said in many quarters, that since nothing outside our activities determines the form they take, their maintenance is a responsibility which falls on us. We must maintain our forms of life. This way of talking gives a misleading, external account of our relation to our lives. We are not ‘minders’ of our lives; we are in our lives; we are our lives. Concern may be expressed about the deterioration of a movement. But that concern is itself an expression of the movement, not an external, technical problem in handling it. We are not the technicians of culture (the tool-box analogy again).

Again, faced with radical differences in ways of living, some have argued that we should then go beyond them to an exploration of the human interests these ways of living serve. The hope seems to be to go beyond them in the interests of a common humanity. To this ought to be said that ways of living do not serve interests, but are an expression of them. If ideals of a common humanity unite people, or are used as a vehicle for criticism, so be it. But those ideals will be specific, and will not ‘transcend’ diverse ways of living. When the stronger claim is made, it usually turns out to be a case of specific interests being sublimed, and masquerading as ‘the interests of all’.

For a related reason, those who speak of our lives as though they are the product of external choices are equally confused. We may have to make all sorts of different choices in the course of our lives, but the circumstances in those lives which call on us to make them are not themselves the product of choice.

Behind these attempts to derive an ethic from the kind of conclusions I have reached is, perhaps, a view of language as the mastery of a number of techniques, in the way I might become a master of a game I play.
We may say of someone that he has mastered a golf course. There is even a tournament called ‘The Masters’. But learning a language is learning what it is to be at home in it; learning to find one’s feet with a people whose language it is. Learning, for example, what it is to greet and to be greeted. And this cannot be accounted for in terms of mastering a technique. Some things I learn do involve learning techniques, of course. And even in speech, there are techniques of debate and rhetoric. But one cannot speak of language or of our lives, generally, in this way. When I say ‘Good morning’ to you, I am not employing a technique to greet you. I am simply greeting you; greeting you in a language we share. That is why if I try to imagine a language, I find myself imagining a way of living. Today, as with the Sophists in Athens, talk of skills and techniques invade the conclusions about life and language I’ve struggled to reach. There seems to be a crying need for skills: social skills, personal skills, inter-personal skills and even life skills. Imagine that – life as a skill. What would it be to apply it? What would it be to master it? A culture in which those questions are entertained as problems waiting to be solved, is not one in which it is easy to elucidate the conclusions I have reached in this chapter.

Notes

2. A list of the propositions discussed by Wittgenstein in On Certainty is provided by Mary McGinn (1989), 102–3.
3. See OC 467.
5. See PI 221.
6. For support for this distinction see McGinn (1989), 85.
7. For this objection, see Conant (1998), 216.
9. See, for example, Gill (1974).
10. See Wolgast (1987), 147.
11. Again, see OC 467.
12. I think I got dangerously close in my introduction to Interventions in Ethics (1999b), in my emphasis for settling for interventions in ethics. For my considered view of the contemplative character of philosophy, see my Philosophy’s Cool Place (1999a).
15. See Ashdown (2001). For objections to the view that there can be propositions which have a sense but no use, see Wolgast (1987) and Levett (1993).
16. See Rhees (2003), part Two, section XVII.
17. For a discussion of whether the sureness in contexts such as these can be discussed in terms of truth and falsity, see Winch (1988) and Stoutland (1998).
19. For a strong argument in favour of the suggestion, see Norman Malcolm (1982). For Rhees’ equally strong criticism, see Rhees (2003), part Two, section XV.
20. For this suggestion, see Stroll (1994), 170–1.
22. See Winch (1998) and Rhees (2003), part II, section XIV.
23. For an attempt to argue that the appeal to our human constitution is to take a necessary step beyond Wittgenstein of a kind we find in the philosophy of Thomas Reid, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and The Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See my afterword to Rhees (2003) for my criticism.
24. See Rhees (2003), part II, section XIII.
25. For such an argument on behalf of history see Stroll (1994), 151.
26. This is a major theme of Rhees’ *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* (1998), which contains a detailed critique of the analogy between games and language.
28. As, for example, Bernard Williams does in *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).
29. For this tendency, see Cavell (1979).
31. For the tendency to link speaking with a mastery of a technique, see McGinn (1989).
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Part I
The Framework Reading
Why does On Certainty matter? The answer is simple. Wittgenstein’s book is the most important contribution to the theory of knowledge since The Critique of Pure Reason. But the support for that simple answer requires detailed articulation. Accordingly, I shall be giving six answers to the question, while recognizing that they hardly constitute all that might be said by way of response. As the readers of this volume will quickly ascertain, many of its contributors have their own and quite different interpretations of the work. But however much their views differ from mine, it is palpable that all of them regard it as a major contribution. The six answers I offer form a connected set that runs as follows: Wittgenstein begins by describing (1) a form of foundationalism that differs from anything in the previous philosophical literature; and that (2) he identifies with certainty. This assimilation in turn leads to (3) a unique conception of how knowledge and certainty differ; and that discrimination issues (4) in the distinction between subjective and objective certainty. Once in place, that contrast becomes the basis for (5) an unprecedented treatment of radical scepticism; which (6) is then shown to rest on the role or roles played by human communities in determining what counts as sensible doubting. I will explore these complexities seriatim.

1. Foundationalism

One of the later Wittgenstein’s most original contributions to philosophy is his account of what he calls language games. In the Brown Book of 1934 they are described as ‘systems of communication’ (entry 5) and are said to be ‘more or less akin to what in ordinary language we call games’. This concept undergoes modification in the Philosophical Investigations
(Part I of which was completed in 1936) where in entry 23 a language game, now spoken of in the singular, is depicted as ‘a form of life’ or a slice of human behaviour. In the *Investigations* the idea that language games rest on a ground or foundation is wholly absent. It is only in *On Certainty* – his final, uncompleted writing – that such a notion appears. In this work, as occasionally occurs in PI, he frequently speaks of ‘the language game’.\(^1\) Following that usage, I will therefore refer to the notion in the singular throughout this essay. The idea that the language game rests on a foundation (or as he also sometimes says, ‘foundations’,) is one of the signs that Wittgenstein’s thinking had reached a new stage of development before his death in 1951. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock is the first scholar to give a name to this late creative impulse, in her reference to ‘the third Wittgenstein’.\(^2\)

According to Wittgenstein’s view in *On Certainty*, the foundations of the language game stand outside of and yet support the language game. They are identified in a series of metaphors as ‘the hinges on which the doors turn’, ‘the rock bottom of our convictions’, ‘the substratum of all my inquiring’, and most persuasively, ‘that which stands fast for me and many others’. All of these expressions are metaphors for certainty. It is Wittgenstein’s main thesis that what stands fast is not subject to justification, proof, the adducing of evidence or doubt and is neither true nor false. Whatever is subject to these ascriptions belongs to the language game. But certitude is not so subject, and therefore stands outside of the language game. It does so in two different forms, one relative, the other absolute. A proposition that is exempt from doubt in some contexts may become subject to doubt in others, and when it does it plays a standard role in the language game. This is the relativized form of certitude. But some beliefs – that the earth exists, that it is very old – are beyond doubt. Their certitude is absolute.

The idea that Wittgenstein is a foundationalist is highly controversial, since in the *Investigations* he rejects any form of foundationalism. But the textual evidence for this interpretation is overwhelming. OC contains a total of 676 entries. In more than 10 per cent of these, Wittgenstein uses explicitly foundational language – ‘Boden’, ‘Grund’ and ‘Fundament’ – in order to draw a contrast between the language game and what underlies and supports it.\(^3\) When entries that do not use explicit foundational language are added we can see that foundationalism is a major theme in this work. It is impossible to discuss all these passages here, but one can illustrate what a more expansive treatment would reveal. ‘If the true is what is grounded (*Begrundete ist*) then the ground (*der Grund*) is not true, nor yet false’ (OC 205).
According to Descartes, the cogito is both true and foundational for the epistemological mansion it supports. In this passage, Wittgenstein disagrees with Descartes. He denies that the ground is either true or false. But the quotation clearly states that there is such a ground. The foundationalist thrust could not be clearer. For most foundationalists the benthic is not only true but evidently true. This remark holds even for axiomatic logical systems, where the axioms are foundational for the theorems that can be derived from them. In most traditional views, beginning with Aristotle’s, the foundational is regarded as true, though not provable; but can be ‘seen’ to be true. As such it is capable of justification as a starting point for the creation of the epistemic or logical structure that rests on it. For Wittgenstein, since the notions of truth and justification are inapplicable, what is foundational has an entirely different status.

2. Foundationalism and certitude

The textual evidence that Wittgenstein is a foundationalist seems to me conclusive. But another step is required to show that he identifies certainty with what is foundational. Again, the textual evidence to this effect is strong. Beginning with entry 111 and continuing to the end he not only uses such common words for certainty, as Gewißheit, Sicherheit and Bestimmtheit, but also other, less common terms for that concept, such as feststehen, festhalten, feststellen and festlegen. These latter are frequently translated into English as ‘to stand fast’. In 111 the connection between standing fast and being grounded or being foundational is made plain. This is typical of many such passages in On Certainty: ‘I want to say: my not having been on the moon is as sure a thing for me [steht für mich ebenso fest] as any grounds [Begründung] I could give for it, (OC 111).

3. The difference between knowledge and certainty

Early in the text, Wittgenstein drives a wedge between the conceptions of knowledge and certainty that is crucial for his new epistemology and which he never abandons in the remainder of the notebook. The distinction is given explicit articulation in 116: ‘Instead of “I know …”, couldn’t Moore have said: “It stands fast for me that …”? And further: “It stands fast for me and many others …” ’ (OC 116).

The expression ‘stand fast’ (or ‘hold fast’, or ‘stay put’) also occurs in 151, 152, 225, 234, 235 and 343. In most of these, that expression is first identified with what is foundational, and then with what is certain.
In 341–3, for example, we read:

That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (OC 341)

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted. (OC 342)

But it isn’t that the situation is like this: We just can’t investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put [müssen die Angeln feststehen]. (OC 343)

As this set of passages indicates, Wittgenstein contends that some propositions, objects or things, are foundational for particular inquiries. They are like the hinges that stand fast when the door (of a particular investigation) turns. ‘If I make an experiment I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts but not that’ (OC 337). The existence of the apparatus is foundational for that specific investigation. Something must be certain – that is, exempt from doubt – in any inquiry. The use of the terms ‘hinges’ and ‘stand fast’, thus connect certainty with that which is foundational.4

In 308, the wedge between knowledge and certainty is driven as deeply as it can penetrate. He says: ‘“Knowledge” and “certainty” belong to different categories. They are not two “mental states” like, say “surmising” and “being sure”’ (OC 308).

It is one of Wittgenstein’s most powerful insights to have shown that knowledge and certainty are not mental states and that they differ intrinsically.

4. Subjective versus objective certitude

In the first 80-plus sections of On Certainty Wittgenstein is concerned with Moore’s use of ‘I know’. His aim is to show that Moore is a captive of the Cartesian model, that is, that Moore thinks knowing consists in being in the psychological state of having complete conviction, as he says tentatively in entry 86: ‘Suppose I replaced Moore’s “I know” by “I am of the unshakeable conviction?” ’ After 86, Wittgenstein becomes increasingly aware that knowing and certitude are completely different notions and that the latter is not a psychological concept at all. In 103, he explicitly differentiates the psychological concept, ‘it is my unshakeable conviction’, from a non-psychological notion, that of something’s ‘being so anchored in all my questions and answers, so anchored that I cannot touch it’.
By 194 the distinction between what Moore is speaking about when he says he knows and the objective concept that Wittgenstein is trying to identify is transformed into the distinction between subjective and objective certainty. He draws the distinction in the following way:

With the word ‘certain’ we express complete conviction, the total absence of doubt, and thereby we seek to convince other people. That is subjective certainty.

But when is something objectively certain? When a mistake is not possible. But what kind of possibility is that? Mustn’t mistake be logically excluded? (OC 194)

His idea here is that objective certainty is to be identified with cases where a mistake is not possible. But this then requires that he explain what he means by a mistake and also the special sense of possibility he is speaking about. Note that he has italicized the word ‘logically’. Though put in the form of a question he is in effect asserting that the sense of possibility he wishes to capture is not that of logical possibility. Clearly that sense of possibility will have something to do with the concept of a mistake. But what is their relationship? Part of the answer is to be found in entry 195. There Wittgenstein writes: ‘If I believe that I am sitting in my room when I am not, then I shall not be said to have made a mistake. But what is the essential difference between this case and a mistake?’ (OC 195)

His question: ‘What is the essential difference between this case and a mistake?’ is answered in a variety of ways in the text, but all of the examples turn on the difference between a mental disturbance and a mistake. Here are some quotations that bring out the distinction:

- In certain circumstances a man cannot make a mistake [nicht irren]. (OC 155)
- In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind. (OC 156)

By way of contrast he describes how we should regard Moore:

- If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented [ihn für geistesgestört halten]. (OC 155)

One who believes he is in his sitting room when he is not is not making a mistake. The error is of a different order of gravity. A mistake as Wittgenstein points out in 156 is an error that fits into the normal pattern of human activity, such as an erroneous calculation. It is a judgement made ‘in conformity with mankind’. But to believe that one is
sitting in his room when one is not is to ‘knock from under my feet the ground on which I stand in making any judgments at all’. Such a ‘revision’ he writes ironically, in putting ‘revision’ in quotation marks, ‘would amount to annihilation of all yardsticks’ (OC 492). The point he is making directly bears on his rejection of scepticism. If the existence of the world one has inherited, or the existence of the community in which one was reared, is subjected to serious doubt, then such a doubt would not be a mistake, like incorrectly adding a long string of numbers, but a mental disturbance. There would be something deeply wrong with one – something perhaps requiring medical attention.

The point he is making here is so important that I should like to elaborate on it by means of an extensive example (my own and not taken from Wittgenstein). It turns on a notion that I will call ‘negational absurdity’.

If a young man is counting a large number of chairs in an auditorium and arrives at the number 239 when the correct total would be 240, we can describe the result as a mistake. He followed a normal counting procedure but in carrying it out he went astray somewhere; still, the result was close. In contrast, we need a different way of characterizing the outcome of a deliberative process if it wildly misses the mark. A person suffering from paranoia who believes that everything he eats has been poisoned by an unknown enemy has not made a mistake when he finds that his food is invariably untainted; he is suffering from a conceptual aberration. We might say he needs psychiatric treatment; we would not say that he should carry out his line of reasoning more attentively. The person who has made a mistake in counting chairs does not need a course in how to count, he simply has to be more careful. There is nothing psychologically wrong with him nor is there anything wrong with the process he uses in order to arrive at the correct number of chairs. So given that he is all right and the process itself is all right, it makes sense to say that he made a mistake in his application of that process. But with our paranoid, his reasoning process is so deviant that we cannot urge him to be more meticulous in its application; some other way of dealing with him and his mode of reasoning is requisite. We can say then that the outcome of such a process is aberrant and not mistaken.

Now suppose that someone were to challenge Moore’s contention that he knows with certainty that the earth existed long before he was born. This person, let us say Russell, might argue that for all he or Moore knows the earth came into existence one hundred years ago. Russell would add that there is nothing logically impossible about this conjecture, though it is false. Wittgenstein would agree that the assertion is not logically impossible, but he would add that it is ‘absurd’. One wishes to say that
it runs counter to everything that we know. So that if a person seriously proposed such an idea we would not say he had made a mistake in his calculations, but that his conception of reality was wildly deviant. In dealing with him, we would treat him analogously to our way of dealing with a paranoid. We would not suggest he go over his calculations again; we might suggest that he see a therapist.

Now the notion of ‘negational absurdity’ is a concept we can use in explicating what I said above when I said that one way of characterizing an aberration is to say that it runs counter to what we all know. In order to see why this is so let us ask, ‘Is it sensible to suppose that the world came into existence 100 years ago?’ One might think so and might support one’s suggestion with this line of reasoning. Let’s assume, Russell might have said, that the earth is actually 6 billion years old, rather than 4.5 billion years old as scientists now believe. The conjecture that it is not 4.5 billion years old is perfectly conceivable and accordingly not absurd. The world as we now know it would be perfectly comprehensible to us if it were 6 billion rather than 4.5 billion years old. The error, which is admittedly large, is nonetheless not to be described as an aberration, since it was the outcome of standard scientific reasoning based upon the evidence that was then available. But the important point is that the world we now experience would in no way be altered by this new finding. At most a scientific conjecture and a few theoretical implications following from it would have to be abandoned. But everything else would be the same – all of our institutions would be what they now are, our present practices, such as the study of history, would remain intact, and so on. There would thus be no discernible or practical difference in our attitude towards or comprehension of the world. And if that is so, there is nothing absurd about the hypothesis that the earth came into existence much earlier than we once believed that it did.

Therefore, Russell might have gone on to ask, how does that hypothesis differ from the hypothesis that the earth came into existence much later than we believed it did, say only 100 years ago? The difference is, after all, merely one of degree, a difference between 100 years and 6 billion. In sum, then, what is absurd about claiming that the earth came into existence only 100 years ago? Admittedly the assertion is false, but the issue is whether it is absurd, as Wittgenstein would claim. Wouldn’t everything be just the same as it is now? And if so, then the assertion is not absurd.

Wittgenstein’s answer would be that the world as we now know it would not be the same. The difference between its being 100 years old or 4.5 or 6 billion years old is not merely a difference in ‘degree’. It is a difference in order. The difference between the earth’s being 6 billion
or 4.5 billion years old has no effect upon our comprehension and understanding of the world in which we now live. But if the world were really only 100 years old that world would be incomprehensible to us; it would be out of joint. Russell’s proposition is thus aberrant and not merely mistaken. Consider how we would react if we sent out a student to count the approximately 250 seats that we knew a large lecture room contained and he returned with the answer that there were none, or that there were only five. If, puzzled by his statement, we then went to the room and found his answer to be wholly inconsonant with what we could immediately see to be the case, we would not say he had made a mistake in counting; we would realize that something had seriously gone wrong – if he had indeed understood our request.

Well, perhaps he had not understood our request – was that the reason for his peculiar finding? But if he had understood it, how could he have come up with the answer he did? Clearly it was not the result of miscounting. His finding is so peculiar it would have to be characterized in some other way – as aberrant, strange, incomprehensible. So it is with the claim, if seriously advanced, that the earth is only 100 years old. If someone seriously advanced such a claim could we really understand it? Of course, there is a trivial sense in which it is understandable: the words are in English and the syntax is in order. But in the sense in which our student’s statement is absurd, so is this. For if it were true that the earth is only 100 years old, none of our present rational practices would be comprehensible. If one is engaged in the study of papal politics in the twelfth century, a task requiring the accumulation and dating of documentary materials that are the basis of information we now possess about events that happened then, how would one continue to act if informed that the world had come into existence after the twelfth century? If the hypothesis were seriously to be entertained, the kind of investigation that one is conducting into medieval papal politics would be some kind of delusion or fantasy. But since history as a discipline is not fantastic, but is a rational activity that, tracing causal chains, carries present knowledge steadily backward in time with no serious lacunae, we know that Russell’s conjecture cannot be taken seriously. If it were it would be aberrant. In this sense then, we can say that the negation of the proposition, ‘The earth is very old’, is absurd. If it were true the world as we now know it with all of its institutions, practices and daily activities would make no sense whatsoever. This is what I mean by ‘negational absurdity’.

Let us put all this in the form of an explicit argument. Human beings engage in various activities, among them history, geology and anthropology, which are dedicated to exploring the past. Such explorations
involve the detailed retrospective tracing of temporal causal sequences, for example that A lived for a certain number of years, was the progeny of B, that B lived for a certain number of years, and was the progeny of C, and so on. If the hypothesis that the earth was not very old were true, such explorations would not be rational, but aberrant, chimerical or delusive. But they are not aberrant, chimerical or delusive. We can say, using Wittgenstein’s parlance, that all the evidence speaks for them; or we could put the point negatively by saying that the opposite hypothesis has nothing on its side. The idea that a hypothesis is absurd both if nothing speaks for it and everything speaks against it is a notion that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein returns to again and again. Here is a typical quotation: ‘What we call historical evidence points to the existence of the earth a long time before my birth; – the opposite hypothesis has nothing on its side’ (OC 190).

Therefore, both because the opposite hypothesis has nothing on its side and because history, geology and anthropology have everything on their side, it follows that the notion that the earth came into existence 100 years ago is absurd. Anyone who seriously believed such a hypothesis would not be making a mistake but would be deranged. In identifying objective certainty with those cases where a mistake is not possible, Wittgenstein is, I believe, tacitly relying on the notion of ‘negational absurdity’, as I have just characterized it.

5. Scepticism

Wittgenstein was not a learned man and his knowledge of the history of philosophy was sketchy at best. But he had an uncanny ability to sort out what was philosophically important from what was peripheral. This is true of his understanding of the nature of epistemology, and especially of the role played by sceptical challenges in that discipline. Some philosophers today argue that epistemology is no longer an important field of philosophy. They contend that the great achievements that science has made since the time of Galileo demonstrate that we have plenty of knowledge about all sorts of things, and accordingly that scepticism can be dismissed as an irrational nuisance. Wittgenstein’s understanding is much deeper. For him scepticism is *less a challenge to the existence of knowledge than to the existence of certitude*. This is why students of this text should understand that, as the title indicates, *On Certainty* is essentially about certainty and only tangentially about knowledge. Its demonstration that certainty exists as a foundation to the language game is what makes it such an important contribution to philosophy.
It is an achievement that allows Wittgenstein to rebut scepticism – but in a way that no previous thinker had thought of.

These remarks raise two problems for the exegete: to explain why the existence of knowledge is not the problem and also to explain Wittgenstein’s conception of scepticism which, as a form of unending doubt, is very much the same as Hume’s. I will pick up these matters seriatim.

As is well known, Hume distinguishes two classes of propositional knowledge. One of these categories he calls ‘propositions about matters of fact’. Philosophers will later give its constituents such names as ‘synthetic propositions’, ‘contingent propositions’, ‘empirical propositions’, and ‘factual propositions’. Hume also refers to them as ‘a posteriori propositions’. What all such propositions have in common, he tells us, is that none of them is certain; at best they can be established only with various degrees of probability. The other category he denominates as ‘relations of ideas’, and often says of its propositional constituents that they are ‘a priori’. In subsequent philosophy they will be characterized as ‘tautologies’, ‘logical truths’, ‘necessary truths’ or ‘analytic statements’ and so on. For Hume, they also possess a common feature; namely, they are certain but produce no information about the world. They are the products of the special, usually definitional, relationships holding between their terms. From the truth of the sentence, ‘All giants are tall’, it does not follow that there are giants. Or as Wittgenstein wittily remarked: ‘For example, I know nothing about the weather when I know that it is either raining or not raining’ (TLP 4.461).

According to this Humean analysis, scientific knowledge consists of propositions having the highest degrees of probability about matters of fact. Most scientists would agree about the probable nature of their findings. This is because scientific generalizations (including laws) are determined to be true on the basis of past experience; and since past experience, being only a sample of all experience, might turn out in the light of future happenings to be corrigeable, such propositions can never be certain. To say that propositions are certain entails that they hold in all possible circumstances, and therefore no future experience can run counter to them. But Hume was also a notable sceptic who held that our ineradicable beliefs in the principle of induction, the existence of the external world, and the reliability of memory were neither probable nor analytic. They were thus without any rational support, and it was this fact that opened the door to sceptical intrusions. Hume’s scepticism is thus not directed against the possibility of scientific (probable) knowledge. He accepts that such ‘knowledge’ exists. From this Humean perspective, science is a form of mitigated scepticism because it is willing to settle for
probable knowledge. The real issue for the ideological or radical sceptic, instead, is certitude; and this has been the crux for epistemology since the time of Sextus Empiricus. Like Hume and Descartes, Wittgenstein understood this to be the case, and this is therefore what On Certainty is essentially about. In support of this claim we can again turn to the text. It is interesting that the last entry in On Certainty deals with the Cartesian Dream Hypothesis, a radical form of scepticism by any standards. Wittgenstein attempts to neutralize its draconian thrust as follows:

I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says: 'I am dreaming', even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream 'it is raining', while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain. (OC 676)

This quotation is important for another reason. It gives us a real clue about the kind of scepticism Wittgenstein is opposing in On Certainty. In this work, and indeed in all of his writings from the Tractatus on, Wittgenstein's sceptic is an individual who raises doubts that the average person would never conceive of. In On Certainty this difference is portrayed as the difference between philosophical and ordinary doubt, or to put the point somewhat differently, Wittgenstein is distinguishing between two kinds of doubting, that which in principle has a terminus and that which in principle is endless. As he says: ‘Someone who doubted whether the earth had existed for 100 years might have a scientific, or on the other hand a philosophical, doubt’ (OC 259). The contrast can be illustrated by a pair of examples. Some American voters are said to be sceptical – and indeed are – of the promises made by the politicians whose campaigns they are following. But they do not doubt that the politicians exist, that they speak English, have had two parents, and so forth. In being sceptical of political pronouncements they are appealing to the past record of the candidates, or to the feasibility of their prospective programmes. Their kind of doubt is perfectly acceptable to Wittgenstein; it belongs to the language game and in principle is capable of resolution. But the sceptic against whom Wittgenstein's philosophy is directed is more extreme. His worries are obsessive and non-terminating. Here in a brilliant analogy is how Wittgenstein describes the philosophical (radical) doubter:

It would be as if someone were looking for some object in a room; he opens a drawer and doesn’t see it there, then he closes it again, waits, and opens it once more to see if perhaps it isn’t there now, and keeps on like that. He has not learned to look for things. [...] He has not learned the game we are trying to teach him. (OC 315)
In this passage, Wittgenstein is stressing the obsessive nature of philosophical doubt. As he says the person opening and closing a drawer ‘keeps on like that’. We can take at least two important messages from this citation. First, to open and close a drawer over and over again while presumably looking for something is senseless. Returning to the concept of negational absurdity mentioned earlier, we can say that such a person is demented; there is something irrational about his behaviour. For any normal person, it is sufficient to open and close a drawer two or perhaps even three times in order to search for something. So the man opening and closing a drawer endlessly is not behaving ‘in conformity with mankind’. And because that is so, his behaviour is not a case of doubt, as one can see by comparing him with that of the voter who has resolvable doubts about the promises made by a politician.

6. The role or roles of the community

The second lesson to be learned from the example is that what determines something to be a case of doubt is its conformity to community practice. The sceptic does not engage in any recognizable community practice and hence his supposititious worries are not doubts at all. They do not raise real questions and therefore do not require real answers. As Wittgenstein puts it: ‘A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt’ (OC 450), and ‘A doubt without an end is not even a doubt’ (OC 625); and in a lengthy passage he writes:

Doubting has certain characteristic manifestations, but they are only characteristic of it in particular circumstances. If someone said that he doubted the existence of his hands, kept looking at them from all sides, tried to make sure it wasn't ‘all done by mirrors’, etc., we should not be sure whether we ought to call that doubting. We might describe his way of behaving as like the behaviour of doubt, but his game would not be ours. (OC 255)

In saying that his game would not be ours, Wittgenstein is claiming that sceptical doubts do not belong to the language game. In Wittgensteinian parlance: ‘They lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry’ (OC 88). They are thus impotent with respect to any significant investigation carried out by persons playing the language game, including the scientist.

The essential role (or roles) that the community plays in determining what counts as sensible behaviour can be illustrated in yet a different way. In On Certainty Wittgenstein goes to great pains to describe the uses of
such words as ‘believe’, ‘know’, ‘evidence’, ‘justification’ and ‘doubt’. He does so not merely because he is interested in such linguistic phenomena but also and primarily because his intention is to illuminate that which those words normally denote or pick out. These are features we find in everyday human life; that is, people believe, doubt, justify and provide evidence for or against various claims. Language is important because it is the medium for giving us an accurate picture of ordinary human activity. This picture reveals that each word in ordinary discourse has a restricted range of application. This is so because the activities themselves are circumscribed by rule-governed boundaries. It is these boundaries that determine when an activity makes sense. There is a parallel at the linguistic level. If words are stretched beyond their normal limits they cease to make sense. Thus one can use words correctly and one can use them incorrectly. To say that they are used correctly means that they conform to the way that native speakers use them in the language game. But this same principle is applicable to the activities that these words denote. Doubting is a good example. This is an everyday practice that has its limits. These limits are defined by de facto rules that govern what actually takes place in the language game. But as Wittgenstein stresses, ‘these rules … only make sense if they come to an end somewhere’ (OC 625).

As the description of the obsessive searcher indicates, his behaviour violates the canons that determine what counts as searching for something. Wittgenstein says that person has not learned the game ‘we are trying to teach him’. But who is the ‘we’ that Wittgenstein is referring to? It is the collective members of the community. All of us grow up in a community and our behaviour is determined to be sensible or not by its conformity to the rules of such an assemblage. The obsessive sceptic is not behaving according to such procedures; and this is why his behaviour is senseless. To have diagnosed why scepticism is not merely false but aberrant is one of Wittgenstein’s greatest achievements. It is one, but not the only one, of the features that justifies the claim that On Certainty is the most important contribution to epistemology since Kant’s First Critique.

Notes

1. This expression occurs, for example, in such passages as: 3, 82, 204, 256, 370 (twice), 392, 446, 457, 458, 497, 559, 560, 579, 609, 628.
4. There is an increasingly large literature on the question of how so-called ‘hinge propositions’ relate to Wittgenstein’s foundationalism. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (2004a), for example, distinguishes various forms of hinge propositions, beginning with local hinges – such as ‘This is what we call “red”’ – and ending with universal hinges, such as ‘Humans cannot vanish into thin air.’ The former requires training in a particular language, for example, but the latter is universal in the sense that nobody has ever taught others this principle in order to underpin what we say and do in our relationships to other persons. In this sense, it is instinctual or primitive. She also holds that all hinges show themselves in what we say and do, that is, in our acting. Accordingly, no hinges are genuinely propositional (i.e., either true or false, justifiable or not). Rather, their articulation, as such, is merely artificial. To put her point in a somewhat different way, she urges that so-called ‘hinge propositions’ should be understood, as Wittgenstein himself says, as ‘rules of grammar’ or ‘rules of instruction’ (see OC 28, 29, 36 and 44, e.g.). Her analysis explains certain ambiguities in the text. Wittgenstein does give the impression (in OC 96, e.g.) that the same proposition can stand fast at one time and not stand fast at another, that is, the same meaning or sense can harden into a rule of grammar or soften into a genuine empirical statement. But she thinks that his intent is to distinguish genuine empirical propositions from rules, and then the many different functions that rules play in daily life from one another, some being local, some being universal and so on. Such rules, on her reading, are not propositions at all, so the term ‘hinge proposition’ gives rise to misunderstandings of what Wittgenstein intended. I think her account solves most of the serious exegetical problems about the concept of a ‘hinge proposition’.

5. I wish to thank Robert Rowan for his help with this section of the chapter.
3

Why Wittgenstein Isn’t a Foundationalist

Michael Williams

I

Epistemological foundationalism is often presented as a way of responding to scepticism. The scepticism in question is that generated by the regress argument. Suppose that knowledge is justified true belief: surely whatever justification we possess for a particular belief must itself involve knowledge (or at least justified belief). This simple observation seems to threaten us with an infinite regress of grounds for grounds for grounds, and so on without end. The sceptical problem arises because, while the regress itself is apparently vicious, it is not clear that it can be blocked in a satisfactory way. If at some point we fail (or refuse) to provide a justification for a claim we have advanced, the sceptic will say we are just making an assumption, which is no basis for knowledge. If we find ourselves returning to some claim already entered, he will say that we are reasoning in a circle, which is also no basis for knowledge. Regress, assumption, circularity: call this unpalatable menu of options ‘Agrippa’s Trilemma’.

If we take the Trilemma at face value, and if we want to avoid scepticism, it seems that we must put a better face on one of the three options. Very few philosophers have taken the ‘infinitist’ option of arguing that the regress is not really vicious. The consensus has been that we must go one of two ways: either we argue that there are ‘epistemologically basic’ beliefs or ‘terminating judgments’ which, while not depending for their justification on further beliefs, are still genuinely justified; or we argue that the interdependence exhibited by a suitably extensive and integrated system of beliefs is to be distinguished from simple circularity, so that justification flows from the system to its component beliefs. Foundationalists take the first approach, coherence theorists the second.
Our topic here is foundationalism, though we shall glance briefly at the coherentist option in due course.

The defining feature of basic beliefs is that they are justified independently of any inferential connections to further beliefs. Traditionally, this has been taken to imply that basic beliefs are intrinsically credible. As intrinsically credible, they bring chains of justification to an end, without themselves being mere assumptions. They constitute an autonomous stratum of knowledge on which all other knowledge (or justified belief) depends.¹

Traditional foundationalism faces two main problems. First, it is not easy to make clear sense of the notion of intrinsic credibility. Second, to the extent that we can make sense of it, we are bound to find that the class of basic beliefs is extremely restricted. We then face the problem of recovering a useful superstructure of knowledge, starting with this restricted basis. In the quest for foundations, the need for security tends to conflict with the requirement of adequacy. For example, it has often been held that basic empirical knowledge is experiential knowledge: knowledge of how things appear to us. There is considerable plausibility to this view. Things can appear to be other than the way they really are. But it does not even make clear sense to suppose that things could only appear to appear a certain way. With appearance, we seem to hit rock bottom. However, if we treat experiential knowledge as truly foundational, and all knowledge of the world as ‘inferential’, we need to show how experiential knowledge constitutes a sufficient basis for knowledge of the external world. This constructive task is difficult to carry out, if it can be carried out at all.

In this problematic situation, Wittgenstein’s notes collected as On Certainty are of great interest. In these notes, Wittgenstein has been taken to advance the following views:

1. There are basic certainties, propositions or judgements that we do not and (in some way) cannot doubt but which are nevertheless not items of knowledge.
2. These basic certainties can be thought of as ‘framework judgments’ in the following sense: by lying ‘apart from the route travelled by inquiry’ (OC 88), they constitute the framework within which practices of inquiring, justifying beliefs, arguing, asking for and giving reasons, making knowledge-claims and so on take place.
3. In contrast to the basic propositions of traditional foundationalism, framework judgements are extremely heterogeneous. They include (among other things) elementary mathematical propositions
(‘12 × 12 = 144’) and simple recognitional judgements (‘Here is one hand’); but also quite general claims about the world around us (‘The Earth has existed for many years past’, ‘Every human being has two parents’).

4. Framework judgements are not certain because self-evident or intrinsically credible. Rather, their certainty accrues to them as a matter of meaning. Someone who doubted them could not learn the language-games in which they are embedded and thus could not express the kinds of judgements that those language-games enable. At the extreme, doubting (if it were possible) would preclude making any judgements at all.

5. Knowledge-claims can be intelligibly entered only where questions of justification, evidence, doubt and others can arise. Since such questions cannot arise in connection with framework judgements, framework judgements are not (cannot intelligibly be supposed to be) known to be true. More generally, judgements that make justification possible are themselves outside the scope of justification. Our relation to framework judgements is thus wholly non-epistemic.²

The last point is problematic, and it is not clear to me that Wittgenstein himself was fully committed to it.³ But setting the question of whether framework judgements can express knowledge, Wittgenstein seems to offer an attractive prospect: a way of fulfilling the foundationalist demand for terminating judgements, while detaching the idea of such judgements from the doctrine of intrinsic credibility, hence from commitment to a restricted basis.

Read this way, Wittgenstein is not rejecting the idea of foundations for knowledge. Rather, he is pointing out that foundational judgements are both much more variegated and, in an important way, different in character than has traditionally been supposed. In other words, Wittgenstein is a foundationalist, but a foundationalist of a strikingly non-traditional sort. Avrum Stroll (1994) argues explicitly for this interpretation of Wittgenstein’s views. However, in my view, it is a bad idea to think of Wittgenstein as any kind of foundationalist.

Is the question of Wittgenstein’s ‘foundationalism’ just terminological? In a way, it is. But words matter, not least because they have a history, in the course of which they pick up associations that cannot easily be cancelled. Thus while the term ‘foundationalism’ can be applied with some latitude, there are limits. If the term is not to be virtually drained of meaning, we must recognize that foundationalism is more than the view that there are certainties of some kind or other, so that scepticism
goes wrong somehow. It is a theoretical position in epistemology involving distinctive commitments, methodological and theoretical. The danger in associating Wittgenstein with foundationalism, then, is that by so doing we will almost certainly underestimate the radical character of his anti-sceptical views.

Stroll characterizes foundationalism by invoking the image of an inverted pyramid. Towards the pyramid’s bottom point, we find a smaller class of basic judgements; the remainder of our beliefs and judgements belong to a superstructure resting on this basis (Stroll 1994, 143–4). At first sight, this conception of foundationalism – by no means unfamiliar – seems purely structural, and indeed seems to instantiate the overly generic understanding just rejected. On closer examination, however, Stroll’s image is rich in suggested commitments.

First, we are given a single triangle, supposedly representing human knowledge, with the beliefs clustered at the apex of the inverted triangle amounting to ‘the’ foundations of knowledge. Thus, without being quite explicit, the image definitely suggests that the foundations of knowledge are the same for everyone. This is certainly the view of traditional foundationalists, for whom genuine foundations are, indeed must be, universal. We might say, this commitment is what makes foundationalism a theory of knowledge.

Second, the image invites us to suppose that we can draw a line across the pyramid, separating base from superstructure. And indeed, all traditional foundationalisms propose some such principle of demarcation. We might say that this is what makes a foundationalist epistemology a theory of knowledge.

Third, the image makes it natural to suppose that, with the line in place, we could cut off the top of the pyramid, leaving its more ‘basic’ section intact. This, too, is a supposition that traditional foundationalists have been all too ready to make, committed as they have been to the independence or autonomy of basic judgements. Traditionally, this autonomy has been thought to be both epistemic and semantic. No surprise here: there would be little point in insisting that the superstructure rests on the basis if, in order to entertain ‘basic’ certainties, we had to presuppose lots of other non-basic propositions to be true. It scarcely matters whether the considerations that demand such presuppositions are epistemic or semantic: such presuppositions, in and of themselves, would compromise the idea of a genuine foundation. Indeed, insistence on the autonomy of basic beliefs is what separates foundationalism from its traditional rival, the coherence theory (whose adherents are typically semantic as well as epistemic holists).
Fourth and last, the picture of the superstructure resting squarely on the base, hints strongly at some kind of tight logical connection between basic and non-basic beliefs. Why logical? Because basic beliefs must support non-basic without presupposing ancillary non-basic commitments. For example, suppose that we locate the foundations of empirical knowledge at the level of experiential knowledge: if we then suppose that the justificational link between experiential knowledge and beliefs about the world (which are of course non-basic), is merely empirical (because how things seem is reliably correlated with how they are), we would be making the justificatory force of basic beliefs depend on non-basic presuppositions, contrary to the whole spirit of the foundationalist enterprise. And most foundationalists want the connection to be tight, for they see little point in recognizing foundational beliefs, if these fail to offer a way of rationally deciding what we should and should not accept at the non-basic level. Indeed, foundationalists generally charge coherence theorists with offering a view of knowledge that is insufficiently constraining, allowing for too many alternative ‘total views’. Traditionally, foundationalists have been committed to the rational adequacy of the foundations of knowledge.

Universality, specifiability, independence and adequacy: the four characteristics of traditional foundations. As I read him, Wittgenstein strips human certainties of all four. This is why we should not think of him as a foundationalist.

II

Universality and specifiability are closely related and can be considered together. To postulate universal foundations is not to suppose that everyone has exactly the same basic beliefs. The thought is rather that, for all people, the same broad kinds of beliefs count as basic. Thus to make plausible the idea of universal foundations, we must provide some way, however vague, of delimiting the class of basic beliefs, indicating what kinds of beliefs cluster towards the apex of the inverted pyramid. The partition between basic and non-basic beliefs must be theoretically tractable.

To specify the class of basic beliefs or judgements, foundationalists have traditionally looked to the content of basic beliefs. Wittgenstein has no sympathy with this approach: our diverse certainties are not associated with any particular kinds of content. Already, the question of universal foundations is up for grabs. I shall have more to say about this question shortly. But first I want to turn to the issue of specifiability.

Wittgenstein denies that the class of basic certainties can be theoretically delimited. For Wittgenstein, certainties are judgements entered or
presupposed in particular circumstances; and these circumstances – hence the judgments that hold fast in them – cannot be identified by any rule. For example:

One may be wrong even about ‘there being a hand here’. Only in particular circumstances is it impossible. – ‘Even in a calculation one can be wrong – only in certain circumstances one can’t.’ (OC 25)

But can it be seen from a rule what circumstances logically exclude a mistake in the employment of rules of calculation?

What use is a rule to us here? Mightn’t we (in turn) go wrong in applying it? (OC 26)

Here Wittgenstein echoes a central theme from his *Philosophical Investigations*: language use cannot be guided by explicitly formulated rules, for such rules would themselves be open to misinterpretation or misuse. At bedrock level, the rules of our language-games must exist implicitly in practice. He continues:

If, however, one wanted to give something like a rule here, then it would contain the expression ‘in normal circumstances’. And we recognize normal circumstances but cannot precisely describe them. At most, we can describe a range of abnormal ones. (OC 27)

Practice in the use of the rule also shews what is a mistake in its employment. (OC 29)

It is not just that in practice the boundary between a certainty and a hypothesis is vague – though this is also true – it is that, at a general theoretical level, it is unspecifiable in principle, even vaguely.

The conclusion to draw is that Wittgenstein’s ‘foundationalism’ does not amount to a theory of knowledge in anything like the traditional sense. For the foundationalist, basic and non-basic judgments belong to distinct and fundamental theoretical kinds, as perhaps do acids and alka-lis for a chemist. But if Wittgenstein is right, the analogy is badly flawed. We can state a criterion for a substance’s being an acid (being a proton-donor), which is exactly what we cannot do for a contextual certainty. Wittgenstein disavows the kind of theoretical understanding that foundationalists have aspired to. Knowledge and justification are not objects of theory to anything like the extent that has been traditionally supposed.

Now Stroll, a subtle and attentive reader, is aware of these deflationary tendencies. He explains them by finding in *On Certainty* two kinds of foundationalism (1994, 155f). The first kind identifies the foundations of knowledge with a class of basic judgements. But this gives way to a
second kind in which the foundation of knowledge is not judging at all but *acting*.

Here is the second kind of foundationalism supposedly on display:

Giving grounds, ... justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC 204)

However, this passage should not be taken to treat acting as something distinct from judging, on which judging can then be seen to rest. Rather, Wittgenstein’s claim is that judging *is* a form of acting. The contrast in the passage just cited is not between acting and *judging* but between acting and *seeing*. Certainties are not held fast because of their transparent truth (to the eye of the mind) but because of their role in language-games. They are certain because they are treated as such. This is not a matter of making assumptions. Judgements that stand fast would not mean what they do – indeed, the language-game in which they are embedded might not exist at all – if they were treated as open to doubt. (Think of elementary arithmetical judgements.)

Someone might object that all that this shows is that Wittgenstein is a very non-traditional foundationalist. Granting that Wittgenstein is right to suggest that we cannot specify the class of such judgements in anything like the traditional way, this does not invalidate the picture of the inverted pyramid. The basic judgements are still there, holding everything else up, even if we cannot say precisely what they are. Furthermore, the fact that the class of basic certainties cannot be specified in detail does not mean that there is nothing illuminating to say about its members. Wittgenstein himself has lots to say. For example, going wrong with respect to a basic judgement cannot intelligibly be thought of as a mistake. Such an abstract characterization, while not yielding a checklist of criteria for identifying basic certainties, does illuminate in a general way the capacity of basic judgements for playing a distinctive role in practices of inquiry and reason-giving.

This objection brings us back to universality, for it underestimates the degree of heterogeneity that Wittgenstein finds in ‘basic’ certainties. Some certainties are perceptual judgements about objects in our surroundings (‘Here is one hand’). Others are general propositions, belonging to the scaffolding of our Moorean common sense (‘The Earth has existed for many years past’). Still others are presuppositions of quite specialized, thus potentially culturally specific, forms of inquiry (history, geology, physics). Thus while some certainties may be universal, others need not be, and
some manifestly aren’t. It may be that in no case is denial of a ‘framework’
judgement a matter of making a mistake. But ‘going wrong other than by
making a mistake’ is itself a theoretically unruly category. In some cases,
denying a basic certainty may result in a breakdown of intelligibility: we
have no idea what the person could be thinking. In other cases, it may be
a sign of mental disturbance. In yet others, it may indicate a view of the
world that diverges seriously from our own. Accordingly, ‘not being sub-
ject to mistake’ fails to pick out the kind of property that would offer a
unifying explanation of how it is that some judgements stand fast.\textsuperscript{4}

III

We are not quite finished with universality. But let us turn to the sup-
posed independence of basic and non-basic judgements.

Although Wittgenstein is sceptical of much epistemological theoriz-
ing, it would not be correct to claim that his approach is ‘descriptive’ to
the point where he has \textit{nothing} to say about judgements that stand fast.
His thought: judging is acting – that judgements are certain because they
are (in practice) treated as such – links his approach to certainty with his
conception of meaning-as-use. Our language-games would not be what
they are if doubts were allowed where they are currently excluded. In cer-
tain cases, admitting doubts where they have no place might leave us
bereft of the capacity to think about certain topics or, at the limit, bereft
of the capacity to judge at all. The exempting of certain judgements from
doubt plays a meaning-constitutive role in our language games.

Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning implies a limited semantic
holism. Practices must be mastered whole: basic certainties are held in
place by things around them. Thus:

\begin{quote}
We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by
learning rules: we are taught judgments and their connection with other
judgments. A \textit{totality} of judgments is made plausible to us. (OC 140)
When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a
single proposition but a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns
gradually over the whole.) (OC 141)
\end{quote}

The italicization of ‘believe’ is significant. Not all responsiveness to our
surroundings is a matter of forming beliefs. The infant who can reliably
produce the vocable ‘Mama’ when its mother appears does not yet believe
that her mother is present. She does not believe anything. Lacking a place
in the larger game, such vocalizations lack the significance that they will
come to have. Indeed, initially they lack semantic content altogether.
Meaning (as use) depends on the connection of judgements with other judgements, as well as with perception and action.

The metaphor of the pyramid elides this essential semantic interdependence of certainties and non-certainties. To be sure, there may be a limited epistemic asymmetry within particular language-games – limited because the plausibility of judgements, as well as their content, can derive from the way they are connected with other judgements, the connected judgements offering each other mutual support (OC 142). But there is little point to thinking of the game as a whole as resting on anything. It is there, like our life.

Again we see that Wittgenstein is better understood as breaking with the mainstream tradition of epistemological theorizing, rather than as taking a position within it. For traditionally minded theorists, the Agrippan Trilemma appears to define the space of theoretical options, foundationalism and the coherence theory. But in the picture Wittgenstein is suggesting, which to some extent he shares with Sellars, both foundationalism and the coherence theory, go wrong. Foundationalists think that if there is to be non-inferential entitlement to particular propositions, there must be a free-standing stratum of basic knowledge on which all other knowledge rests. The semantic inter-dependence of basic and non-basic judgements entails that there is no such stratum. The coherence theory, recognizing semantic inter-dependence, concludes that no epistemic entitlements are genuinely non-inferential. But semantic inter-dependence is compatible with justificational asymmetries. The upshot is that both the foundationalist and the coherentist pictures of knowledge must be set aside. Wittgenstein’s aim is not to deal with the Trilemma by rehabilitating one of the options it presents, but to reject the range of choices on offer.

IV

I will bring the discussion to a close by offering a few brief remarks on the idea that the foundations of knowledge must be rationally adequate: that is, that they must (at least potentially) offer a basis for rationally adjudicating any (empirically) significant dispute.

Now even though the idea of a foundational structure is far from uncontroversial, foundationalism has always been more than a purely structural doctrine. I noted at the outset that foundationalism is often presented as a way of avoiding scepticism. But in its standard forms, foundationalism is also meant to oppose relativism: the thought that beliefs are only justified for a person (a culture, etc), or justified in a framework (where there can be other, perhaps incommensurable,
frameworks). A stripped-down structural doctrine offers no help here. So far as the purely structural doctrine goes, different people might have different basic beliefs (in whole or in part); or even if their basic beliefs are the same, they might build radically different (but equally justified) superstructures on them. It is as much to head off such possibilities, as to refute the sceptic, that foundationalists have tended to insist on both universal foundations and a tight logical connection between basic and non-basic beliefs. The idea is that, in principle, basic beliefs give us what we need to rationally resolve any genuinely empirical question.

We have already seen that Wittgenstein does not insist that all certainties be universal, though some may be. However, connected with his scepticism about universality is a certain scepticism about the rational adequacy of whatever might be thought to belong to the common ground. Here is a striking example:

Men have believed that they could make rain; why should not a king be brought up in the belief that the world began with him? And if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss, could Moore really prove his belief to be the right one? I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way. (OC 92)

We do not doubt that the earth has existed for many years past. That is to say, a definite conception of historical time is part of common sense. But it is less than obvious that every rational being, merely in virtue of the capacity for judgement, would have to share this conception. And while, no doubt, Moore and the king would have to share many certainties in order to converse (or even to think) at all, it is less than obvious that this common ground would give Moore a way to argue the king out of his odd convictions.

Passages like this raise the question of whether Wittgenstein is himself some kind of relativist. In fact, he repudiates relativism as strongly as he does scepticism. Considering a tribe whose members think they visit the moon, though they cannot say how, he writes (at a time when space travel was not yet a practical possibility):

What we believe depends on what we learn. We all believe that it isn’t possible to get to the moon; but there might be people who believe that that is possible and that it sometimes happens. We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief – they are wrong and we know it.

If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far. (OC 286)
This illuminates Moore’s problem with the king. To bring him around, Moore would have to teach the king a good deal (about geology, physics, etc.). But if the king were willing to take this teaching on board, there would be nothing left to argue about: he would already be looking at the world in a new way. In matters like this, teaching can never be just a matter of arguing from antecedent common ground. This does not mean that any view is as good as another. But it does mean that there are limits to argument. And because of these limits, hopes traditionally invested in universal foundations are misplaced.6

V

I identified four commitments defining the traditional idea of a foundation for knowledge: universality, specifiability, autonomy and rational adequacy. But according to Wittgenstein, certainties need not be universal, do not form a theoretically tractable class of judgements, and do not constitute an autonomous stratum of beliefs. Finally, insofar as there are judgements that belong to a common framework – because doubting them would compromise the very possibility of judgement – there is no reason to suppose that they offer, even in principle, a basis for the rational resolution of all disputes, at least if ‘rational’ is equated with ‘argumentative’.

In some ways, the third point is the most important, for it shows Wittgenstein dissenting from foundationalism’s structural picture. I remarked that, in this respect, Wittgenstein’s ideas have something in common with those of Sellars, which is a point I would like briefly to return to.

In a final comment on his reasons for repudiating the picture of a ‘foundation’ for knowledge, Sellars writes:

Above all, the picture is misleading because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a foundation, but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once. (1963, 170; emphasis in the original)

Both foundationalism and the coherence theory look at beliefs in a ‘time-slice’ way, seeking to identify some structural feature in virtue of which our beliefs, taken as a whole, can be seen to be ‘justified’. I think that for Wittgenstein, as much as for Sellars, to have taken this step is already to
have gone wrong. Justifying (along with arguing, teaching, doubting, surmising, explaining, etc.) is something that we do always already within some up-and-running practice of argument, inquiry or discourse. To raise questions of justification in the global, decontextualized and abstract way of the traditional sceptic is to raise questions that have not been given a clear sense. They appear to make sense only because the necessary background for asking any question at all has been suppressed.

I am not going to try to defend this thought here. What I do want to point out, however, is that the ‘static’ picture of knowledge is the common presupposition of the sceptic and the traditional epistemologist. It is because of this common ground that foundationalists should be seen as offering a straightforward answer to scepticism. By contrast, Wittgenstein encourages us to look behind the sceptic’s apparently innocent question; and this is the ultimate reason why Wittgenstein isn’t a foundationalist.

**Notes**

1. For discussion of the traditional idea of a basic belief, see my ‘There are no Basic Beliefs’ in *Epistemology: Central Issues*, edited by Matthias Steup (Blackwell, forthcoming).
2. In rough outline, this is the reading advanced in Marie McGinn’s groundbreaking book, *Sense and Certainty* (McGinn 1989). For an important examination of those certainties that Wittgenstein regards as the ‘hinges’ of inquiry, see Wright (1985).
3. See for example, OC 340. For some discussion of Wittgenstein’s uncertainties on this point, see the concluding section of my (2004b).
4. Everyone recognizes that Wittgenstein’s thoughts are prompted, at least in part, by his puzzlement over Moore’s ‘Proof of an External World’ and ‘Defence of Common Sense’. What has not been recognized, however, is that Wittgenstein views the external world problem (broached in ‘Proof’) and the question of the certainty attaching to common sense more generally as calling for distinct treatments. I defend the need to acknowledge this distinction in Williams (2004b). For a detailed account of Wittgenstein’s response to external world scepticism, see my (2004a).
5. See Sellars (1963), especially pp. 164–70.
6. For further discussion of Wittgenstein and relativism see my (2004b).
Many of Wittgenstein’s late remarks *On Certainty* concern what he calls our ‘system of beliefs’. He says that these beliefs ‘form a system, a structure’ (OC 102). In speaking of this system he uses various kinds of images. These images are often highly metaphorical and not always easy to harmonize with each other or with Wittgenstein’s more straightforward observations. Two sets of images in particular seem to be in irreconcilable conflict with each other. The first group of images emphasizes the idea of foundations while the second group stresses the apparent connectedness and coherence of our beliefs and concepts. This way of underlining coherence could well be read as an attempt to present the whole notion of foundations as doubtful or misleading. On the one hand, Wittgenstein keeps talking about the foundations, the grounds and the bases of our judgements and beliefs. On the other hand, he points out that what we may want to regard as foundations are by no means independent of what they seem to support; that, indeed, they are worse than idle unless they are in their turn given support by what at first glance appears to rest on them.

This line of thought is epitomized by one of the most striking images Wittgenstein uses in *On Certainty*. He writes: ‘I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house’ (OC 248).

This remark outlines the conflict I have mentioned. On the one hand, Wittgenstein *employs* the idea of a last basis of belief, judgement and talk. He does say that by declaring that I have two hands, for instance, ‘I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions.’ But in his next sentence he suggests that it would not be wrong to see the structure apparently supported by that basis as something which actually *carries* its purported basis. But if that is so, then this purported basis does not really do what we expect it to do in ascribing to it a foundational role. That here we are
dealing with some kind of conflict is undeniable. Equally undeniable is the need to find some way of resolving this conflict.

I think that a way out of this conflict can be found; and it can be found by following up on an allusion implicit in Miss Anscombe’s rather free translation of Wittgenstein’s words. In the first sentence of my last quotation from *On Certainty* Wittgenstein says that he has arrived at the *Boden* of his convictions, and a more literal translation of that word ‘Boden’ would be ‘ground’ or ‘bottom’.\(^1\) The *Boden* of a house is its floor (but, as it happens, the word ‘Boden’ can also mean the loft, that is the space directly under the roof). Miss Anscombe, however, chooses the word ‘rock bottom’, which may serve to remind readers of another famous metaphor formulated by Wittgenstein. He uses it in his *Philosophical Investigations*, where he speaks of reaching bedrock in such a way that his spade is turned (see PI 217). A correct understanding of this metaphor, I shall want to suggest, will help us see a way out of the seeming conflict between the foundationalist and coherentist images employed in *On Certainty*. The most useful way of arriving at this way out, however, is not by attempting to walk a direct route but rather by taking a fairly roundabout path, leading through a number of further metaphors developed in Wittgenstein’s late remarks.

The first of these metaphors can be found in the second of the five notebooks used by the editors of *On Certainty* to compile that collection of remarks. Here Wittgenstein writes (and I quote at length):

> It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. (OC 96)

> The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (OC 97)

> But if someone were to say ‘So logic too is an empirical science’ he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing. (OC 98)

> And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away or deposited. (OC 99)
Clearly, this is a striking metaphor, but what is it a metaphor for? What state of affairs or what kind of problem may this image be meant to elucidate? A first step in the direction of an answer may be the observation that the image is intended to throw light on the relation between change and tradition. The waters on the riverbed stand in a similar relation to the riverbed itself as our fluctuating judgements and beliefs stand to the immutable, or imperceptibly changing, content of our traditional beliefs.

This reading, I suppose, points in the right direction or, at least, in the direction intended by Wittgenstein. The metaphor of the riverbed is evidently meant to clarify the two remarks preceding the quoted passage developing that metaphor. In these two remarks Wittgenstein gives a first account of his antecedently introduced notion of a world-picture:

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (OC 94)

The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules. (OC 95)

The ‘inherited background’ of which Wittgenstein speaks can in a way be identified with what I have tentatively called ‘tradition’. But there may be good reasons why Wittgenstein does not use this word and, instead, prefers his more figurative expressions ‘world-picture’ and ‘inherited background’ as well as the image of the riverbed. One of these reasons may be that the term ‘tradition’ is too comprehensive. In such a context this term would normally be understood to cover both the totality of our more or less scientific theories and of our more or less unthinkingly accepted prejudices, fashions and attitudes. And in talking of our world-picture and our inherited background Wittgenstein probably does not want to refer to these totalities. He does not want to refer to them, first, because they contain too much detail and involve too many specific statements of an, in many cases, arcane and not generally accessible nature; second, because they are not sufficiently stable, as many of these views and attitudes do not stand the test of time and are overthrown after short periods of flourishing; and third, because they are in a great number of cases mutually incompatible, as (with the possible exception of some parts of modern natural science and mathematics) most of these views and attitudes are defended by some members of our communities but rejected by other people.
That Wittgenstein does not mainly want to talk about tradition, or traditions, in that sense is clear from the examples he does discuss. These examples are in many cases taken from G.E. Moore or modelled on Moore's examples. They comprise such statements as 'I have two hands', 'The world has existed for a long time', 'I have never been very far from the surface of the earth', 'I have parents, and so has every other human being', 'My name is J. S.', 'For the last month I have had a bath every day', and so on and so forth. In spite of the frequent use of the first-person pronoun none of these or the other examples discussed by Wittgenstein is as specific or unstable as those forming large parts of what we should normally count as a tradition. Nor do we hold different opinions about these matters. On the contrary, the lack of specificity of these examples, their enormous stability and their peculiar indisputability are among his reasons for discussing them in this context.

On the other hand, what we should count as belonging to a tradition is in a different respect not comprehensive enough to include most of the examples Wittgenstein is interested in. These examples tend to be homely to the point of banality, and no one would mention them in order to illustrate what forms part of our tradition. Thus, Wittgenstein's (and Moore's) commonplaces reach beyond the limits of individual traditions. They look a bit like those 'very general facts of nature' that 'mostly do not strike us because of their generality' mentioned in the so-called second part of the Investigations (PI, p. 230); and they remind us of those 'observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes' alluded to in the first part of that book (PI 415).

In the way explained, our world-picture, our inherited background, is more and at the same time less than a tradition in the usual sense of that word. A feature that world-picture and tradition have in common is that under ordinary circumstances they need not, and in a sense cannot, be justified. Neither my world-picture nor the traditions I feel at home in are bodies of views and attitudes that I could be said to have deliberately adopted. Even less could I be said to have adopted them after comparing them with competing world-pictures or traditions and deciding that, to my mind, they are correct or more to my taste than their rivals. Similarly, shaking off part of one's world-picture or abandoning certain strands of a tradition in which one has grown up never are solely a matter of having recognized their incorrectness or another kind of deficiency on their part. A world-picture is more like a religion one acquires by simply growing up within a religious community. You cannot be a member of this community without sharing its religion. And renouncing
a religion is a rather painful affair by which one will sever many of the ties that, up to the moment of this break, have helped to give one’s actions, hopes and expectations a point.

This, I gather, is part of the force of Wittgenstein’s calling the ‘propositions describing this world-picture … part of a kind of mythology’. His choice of this term is of course also connected with his calling the acquisition of a new world-picture the result, not of rational argument, but of a ‘conversion’ (OC 92, 612). And it is naturally reminiscent of Quine’s comparing the status of our theoretical beliefs with the authority of Homeric gods (1964, 44). Still, there is something unexpected about Wittgenstein’s use of the word ‘mythology’. In practically all the other passages of his writings where he uses the word or one of its cognates it bears a clearly negative or pejorative connotation, amounting to something like ‘a mere fiction’ or ‘a misleading fantasy’. Even in his ‘Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*’, where he makes his well-known statement that ‘An entire mythology is stored within our language’ (GB 133), a connection with magic, superstition and potentially misleading features of our language is clearly in view.

As far as I can see, no such negative or pejorative element is present in Wittgenstein’s way of using the word ‘mythology’ in *On Certainty*. In one of his remarks he even uses it in the same breath as his pet image of games and their rules. And when he develops his metaphor of the river and its bed he says that ‘The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift.’ By saying this Wittgenstein not only stresses the protean nature, the mutability and flexibility, of our mythology or world-picture; he also emphasizes its adaptability, its resilience to all kinds of changes. This adaptability is a characteristic which helps our world-picture or mythology to survive in spite of unexpected innovations, ominous changes and apparent incompatibilities or contradictions. The secret of its success is revealed by Wittgenstein by saying that, even though it is quite possible to make a distinction between the ‘the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself’, there is on the other hand ‘not a sharp division of the one from the other’. In other passages of *On Certainty* this lack of a sharp division is identified by stating that there is no clear boundary between methodological propositions and propositions within a method, nor between logical propositions or rules in general and empirical propositions. This lack of a sharp boundary, I take it, is not merely a matter of the vagueness characteristic of the words on one level of our ordinary language; it is also, as the references to method, logic and rules indicate, a certain fuzziness of the borderlines between different levels of discourse. While it is,
as Wittgenstein’s image suggests, quite possible to draw a general
distinction between these different levels, a *sharp* distinction between
rules etc. on the one hand and empirical propositions on the other is just
as impossible to make as a clear-cut division between the waters on the
river-bed and the shift of the bed itself.

Vagueness and the lack of a sharp distinction between what, following
Wittgenstein, one may wish to call the level of ‘logic’ and the level of
the empirical go some way towards explaining the resilience and adapt-
ability of our *quasi*-mythological world-picture. They do so by permitting
us to sort new, and perhaps unexpected, borderline cases in different
ways, according to whether they suit or fail to suit our purposes, and by
allowing us to rank accepted propositions in different ways, according
to whether it suits or does not suit us to hold onto them come what may.
The question how far we could or should go in holding onto previously
accepted propositions is not clearly answered by Wittgenstein. But he
does say that in some cases it is a ‘fact that we do not need to give way
before any contrary evidence’ (OC 657). He also considers the question
whether ‘even if an irregularity in natural events did suddenly occur,
that wouldn’t have to throw me out of the saddle’ (OC 619), and he won-
ders if it would ‘be unthinkable that I should stay in the saddle however
much the facts bucked’ (OC 616).

At this point many people would feel like saying: Well, there are
logical and mathematical propositions, and these we may indeed want
to regard as immune to any kind of revision, whereas it is the charac-
teristic mark of empirical propositions that revising or abandoning
them should at least be thinkable. And it is *empirical* propositions that
Wittgenstein speaks of in developing his image of the river-bed. To some
extent Wittgenstein shares this feeling: he does not wish to say that
there is no real difference between mathematical propositions, for
instance, and certain empirical ones that are regarded as ‘incontrovertible’
(OC 657). He says that mathematical propositions have, ‘as it were
officially, been given the stamp of incontestability’ (OC 655). They
might be called ‘fossilized’ (OC 657), whereas a proposition like ‘I am
called J.S.’ should, even though it is correctly regarded as incontrovert-
able, not be so called. These two types of propositions have something
in common, namely their apparent incontestability, but they play
importantly different roles. One type is *officially* exempted from doubt;
the other one does not do any official job at all.

But in formulating the metaphor of the river-bed Wittgenstein does
not speak of propositions that have, ‘as it were officially’, been given an
especial kind of status. He speaks of certain propositions ‘of the form of
empirical propositions’ and contrasts them with other empirical propositions. The former are hardened and function as channels. The latter ones are fluid and move along lines prescribed by the former ones. What must not be overlooked here is that Wittgenstein uses, not one contrast, but a pair of contrasts. We have hard versus fluid and mobile versus immobile propositions. To be sure, the members of one group are immobile because they are hard, and members of the other group are mobile because they are fluid. But still, we are dealing with different contrasts. Immobility might be seen as a kind of disadvantage. It is the lack of potential movement which, in its turn, could be regarded as a kind of advantage. On the other hand, hardness by itself might suggest an advantage of a different sort. What is hard cannot be altered as easily as what is fluid. Hard things tend to preserve their shapes while the shapes of fluid ones are unstable. But hard things have the drawback of breaking under sufficient pressure while fluid things are more adaptable.

This series of comparisons could easily be continued: our pair of contrasts could be used to list a large number of ostensible advantages and disadvantages. But whether a certain feature will count as an advantage or not depends on the context of the comparison one wishes to make. One must not forget that a fluid is mobile if it forms part of a river, for instance, whereas it won’t move very far if you pour a bucketful on a footpath. The point of these considerations is that they may help to remove a certain prejudice that tends to give hardness precedence over fluidity. This tendency is intimately connected with the idea of foundations. Only hard foundations will support a house built of brick and mortar. But the same foundations will be of little service when it comes to channelling the waters of a river. Hard foundations can do an excellent job as a support for hard structures. But their very hardness is not necessarily a virtue when the function we are interested in is that of channelling a large quantity of fluid matter. In this case it can be a blessing if the channel is not all hard, impenetrable and immutable. As Wittgenstein stresses, a river-bed can fulfil its function because only partly it consists of hard rock, in other parts of sand which may easily be washed away by the waters of the river.

Thus, Wittgenstein’s image of the river and its bed serves to highlight, among other things, the following two points. First, what stands fast, the river-bed, does not consist of material of equal hardness; some parts consist of rock, other parts of clay or sand. Second, the river-bed is that part of the river which is immobile. To be sure, it stands fast and by doing so contributes to giving the flow of the waters a certain direction. But the river-bed is so to speak the static part while the waters are the
dynamic element – it is these waters which play an active role. In this way Wittgenstein’s metaphor of the river and its bed militates against the usual imagery connected with the idea of foundations. According to this standard view, foundations consist of one block of solid material which is equally hard throughout. And it is the foundations which, by the lights of this conception, do all or most of the work: supporting the rest of the structure is here seen as the main activity which conditions everything that remains to be done. Wittgenstein’s metaphor of the river and its bed is a move away from this conception and its attendant imagery. The river-bed, that section of the whole which stands fast, does part – but only part – of the work while the river itself with its mobile waters does another, and surely not less important, part of the job.

The hard as well as the fluid parts stand, according to Wittgenstein’s formulation of the metaphor, for certain kinds of propositions ‘of the form of empirical propositions’. I do not think that by saying this he wants to exclude mathematical and logical propositions in the strict sense from his image. But these propositions bear as it were an official stamp of hardness and immobility. Wittgenstein is simply more interested in those empirical propositions – or, rather, propositions of the form of empirical propositions – which, while lacking any official sort of stamp, fulfil roles similar to those played by the accredited ones. And his interest is understandable because their roles are far less open to view, and hence require the philosopher’s attention to become more generally visible.

However, Wittgenstein’s characterization of the relevant group of propositions as belonging to the set of those ‘of the form of empirical propositions’ is not entirely unproblematic. He himself recognizes this in different ways. In an interesting passage, where at first glance he seems to revert to the usual image of foundations, he observes:

I want to say: propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language). […] (OC 401)

In this remark the expression ‘propositions of the form of empirical propositions’ is itself thoroughly bad; the statements in question are statements about material objects. And they do not serve as foundations in the same way as hypotheses which, if they turn out to be false, are replaced by others. (OC 402)

In reality Wittgenstein does not revert to the usual image of foundations in this passage, as can be seen from the fact that he concludes this remark by quoting from Goethe’s Faust the famous lines ‘... and write with confidence / “In the beginning was the deed” ’, thereby suggesting
that he does not mean foundations in the sense of a solid layer made of rock-like knowledge. The foundations he speaks of are human actions – a much more mobile and changeable medium than that envisaged by the standard foundational model.

But what is really wrong with the expression ‘propositions of the form of empirical propositions’? One misleading feature of this way of talking consists in suggesting that the relevant propositions form one homogeneous body of more or less certified knowledge. Against this view Wittgenstein insists that ‘[o]ur “empirical propositions” do not form a homogeneous mass’ (OC 213). The misguided view, I take it, is easily arrived at if one overlooks the vagueness of the crucial term as well as its ambiguities. By concentrating on formal features of our sentences we come to forget the variety of uses that can be made of these sentences and are thus led up the garden path toward forgetting the many differences between those uses. Vagueness is stressed by Wittgenstein when he says: ‘Here one must ... remember that the concept “proposition” itself is not a sharp one’ (OC 320). And of course the lack of sharpness – that is, the vagueness – of the notion of a proposition carries over to the more specific notion of an empirical proposition. In addition, these notions conceal various kinds of ambiguities. One kind mentioned by Wittgenstein is the lack of clear boundaries between rules and ordinary empirical propositions (OC 319). He does not merely want to point out that some apparent statements of fact shade into rules. He also wishes to explain that one and the same proposition can at one time function as a rule and at another time as an ordinary statement of fact. Or, as he puts it in the context of the image of the river and its bed: ‘the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing’ (OC 98).

These considerations are in the first place meant to show that talking about propositions of the form of empirical propositions does not get us very far because formal similarity tends to disguise differences in use. Second, this way of talking and the exclusive focus on the form of certain propositions contributes to overlooking that these propositions can play different roles within our ‘system’, as Wittgenstein calls it, that is, both our system of traditional and inherited knowledge and our system, or ways, of extending and testing this knowledge. The image of the river and its bed is a metaphorical way of bringing out the systemic character of this sort of knowledge, but in other passages Wittgenstein does not hesitate to emphasize it explicitly. Thus he says that ‘Our knowledge forms an enormous system. And only within this system has a particular bit the value we give it’ (OC 410). And in another passage
he writes:

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis \([\text{Annahme}]\) takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life. (OC 105)

Not through its possessing a particular form but chiefly by occupying a certain position within our system does a proposition play a certain role, for instance as a statement of fact or a hypothesis or a rule or a norm of representation. And within our system a given proposition can change its role: it can switch back and forth between different roles.

It would be erroneous, however, to imagine that our system is completely changeable, that there is no limit to the possibilities of switching positions within the system. On the one hand, we have the freedom to change the status of an empirical proposition by holding onto it and turning it from an ordinary empirical proposition into what Wittgenstein calls a ‘norm of description’. On the other hand, he wonders:

Isn’t what I am saying: any empirical proposition can be transformed into a postulate – and then becomes a norm of description \([\text{Darstellung}]\). But I am suspicious even of this. The sentence is too general. One almost wants to say ‘any empirical proposition can, theoretically, be transformed …’, but what does ‘theoretically’ mean here? It sounds all too reminiscent of the \(\text{Tractatus}\). (OC 321)

What looks like a theoretical possibility is strongly limited both by structural features of the system and, above all, by the fact that it has a certain history. And its history is by no means independent of the needs and instincts of us human beings who have, often unwittingly, constructed the system. The possibilities of altering the system by changing the positions of certain propositions are restricted, first, by a number of very general facts about our lives and potentialities as human beings and, second, by the more or less theoretical means we have devised for coping with the world we live in. These two kinds of restrictions are mirrored in our system, but they are (as I want to suggest) mirrored in different ways.

The more stable parts of our deliberately constructed theoretical means for coping with the world are rules or norms of representation we explicitly refer to. Examples might be basic propositions about geography, chemistry or history that oscillate between facts mentioned in the introductory part of a textbook and generalities that tend to go
without saying (cf. OC 167–70). At least a number of these rules, or quasi-rules, could be regarded as forming part of what I have called a ‘tradition’ in contrast to the inherited background or implicit world-picture. In discussion we may invoke them to support our arguments or to refute opposing views. Occasionally they are made a subject of debate about their validity or the usefulness of holding onto them. And the result of such debates may be a deliberate change of these principles. The other particularly stable part of our world-picture – that part which is most closely connected with our ways of being the kinds of animals we are – is characterized by the scarcity of occasions on which it is made a subject of discussion. If we talk about it at all, all we can come up with are commonplaces of the most homely kind. And whenever these are cited their very simplicity may, as in the case of G.E. Moore’s sentences discussed by Wittgenstein, arouse our philosophical suspicions.

The difference I have just tried to indicate is to my mind alluded to in the following passage from On Certainty:

Much [Manches] seems to be fixed, and it is removed from the traffic. It is so to speak shunted onto an unused siding. (OC 210)

Now it gives our way of looking at things [Betrachtungen], and our researches, their form. Perhaps it was once disputed. But perhaps, for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts. (Every human being has parents.) (OC 211)

What may once have been disputed is surely a fruit of our own conscious efforts to cope with our environment, whereas what has from time immemorial ‘belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts’ owes little or nothing to those conscious efforts. And, as Wittgenstein’s example (‘Every human being has parents’) shows, the latter part of the scaffolding of our thoughts comes to light in commonplaces that border on the banal. The former part of the scaffolding, the part which is owed to our conscious efforts, may be said to consist of rules, postulates or norms of description and surely comprises general facts about the world, of the kind we mention in teaching children the essentials as well as some basic elements of natural history. Let us call this part of the scaffolding ‘basic rules or information’. I think it is this part of the scaffolding Wittgenstein has in mind when he underlines the way different segments of our system support each other, as for example in the following quotation:

It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support. (OC 142)
What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it. (OC 144)

Propositions expressing basic rules or information stand fast, and by standing fast they hold fast other propositions many of which may not stand fast at all. Still, by standing in this sort of relation to propositions conveying basic rules or information they, in their turn, give additional support to those which have been standing fast anyway.

Up to a point, these considerations nicely fit another central image used in On Certainty. According to Wittgenstein, if our normal propositions are to do any work at all, other propositions must stand fast; they must be withdrawn from the traffic. They function like hinges on which other propositions turn. That this must be so becomes particularly evident when we think of those language-games in which doubts are raised and questions asked. Accordingly, Wittgenstein writes:

[…] the questions that we raise and our doubts depend [beruhen] on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (OC 341)

But it isn’t that the situation is like this: We just can’t investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC 3434)

And in another passage Wittgenstein says about mathematical propositions in particular:

The mathematical proposition has, as it were officially, been given the stamp of incontestability, i.e.: ‘Dispute about other things; this is immovable – it is a hinge on which your dispute can turn’. (OC 655)

As in the case of the river and its bed we are here given an image of immobility, on the one hand, and of mobility on the other. And what is mobile can do its work only in virtue of being given a certain direction by what is immobile. The part which stands fast holds fast the part which is more obviously active while that part which is mobile provides the immobile part with its function. Thus we find a kind of mutuality in this case too.

But, of course, if the hinges are to stand fast and hold fast the mobile part of the total structure, they themselves must be attached to another part of this structure which is capable of lending support to the hinges as well as to what is supposed to turn on them. This requirement implicit in Wittgenstein’s image may be met by pointing out that the hinges are attached to other parts of the total structure that turn on different
hinges. A structure of this kind can be quite stable unless you turn too many mobile sections the wrong way or allow too many hinges to fall into disrepair. What the notion of hinges does not chime with is another image Wittgenstein employs to clarify the idea that certain propositions have to stand fast if other propositions are to do useful work. This image is quite striking, and Wittgenstein explains it as follows:

I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility [bestimmt sie als unbewegt]. (OC 152)

Such an axis of rotation is a very different sort of thing from the kind of hinge on which the previous image is centred. Such an axis of rotation may be said to stand fast, but it does not do any real work; nor does it hold fast anything which in order to be able to move would need its support. One may say that a certain object would not move the way it does unless it, or one of its parts, could be described as rotating around such and such an axis. But that is a completely different kind of statement from the claim, for instance, that a given door turns on certain hinges. And because of this difference I want to conclude that the image of the axis of rotation applies to a different sort of proposition from that to which the hinge image applies.

It is propositions conveying basic rules or information that can be compared with hinges while sentences expressing commonplaces of the type discussed by Moore and Wittgenstein are more like axes of rotation. These commonplaces are never used to tell other people what our environment or our life in that environment are like. They are more similar to certain gestures or exclamations used to bring it home to people that this is how things work. Under normal circumstances they do not surface at all. But if someone is more than commonly obtuse or keeps marveling at the obvious or stubbornly refuses to learn an elementary lesson one may lose one’s patience and exclaim ‘Don’t you see that I have two hands?’ or ‘How should I know that – I have never been on the moon?’ or ‘Stop asking me these silly questions; I know that I shaved this morning’ and so on and so forth through the whole gamut of Moore’s and Wittgenstein’s examples of commonplaces. Like an axis of rotation this sort of sentence does not come to light in ordinary situations. Such sentences are only brought to the surface in order to drive it home that this is how things are and that things would be otherwise if these commonplaces (or these axes of rotation) did not stand as fast as they do.
If one wants to fit my distinction between sentences conveying basic rules or information and commonplaces in with Wittgenstein’s image of certain propositions’ being ‘removed from the traffic’ and ‘so to speak shunted onto an unused siding’, one may try to do it the following way. All propositions removed from the traffic are accommodated in carriages standing on our metaphorical unused siding. These carriages, however, are differently far removed from the traffic. Some of them stand fairly near the main track and can, if any need arises, easily be called in to carry some of the load requiring transport. Other carriages stand much further down the line; they are hidden from view, and under normal circumstances they are left in their remote locations. Most of the time we are completely oblivious of their existence. In the terms of this image one may then say that those carriages standing next to the main track and its traffic contain sentences conveying basic rules or information while those standing far away from where the action is provide accommodation for the strange commonplaces invoked by Moore and discussed by Wittgenstein.

This is a possible extension of Wittgenstein’s metaphor, but it has a feature which I am not entirely happy with. It nicely serves to bring out the difference between two types of proposition removed from the traffic but at the same time it suggests a certain remoteness and invisibility of at least some of these propositions. This remoteness and invisibility do not really agree with the situation as described by Wittgenstein. It is not as if the commonplaces and perhaps part of the basic rules or information intended were really hidden from view and stood at a large distance from where business is conducted. No, I think that these commonplaces are out in the open and quite plain to see. The case is similar to that of the purloined letter mentioned in the title of a famous story by Edgar Allan Poe: the letter is not concealed; it is clearly visible. Most people do not recognize it; they fail to see what it really is. It requires the keen intelligence and investigatory powers of a clever detective to notice that what can be seen by all is of a different nature from what the majority of people would offhand claim it to be. Similarly, it requires the investigatory powers of a smart philosopher to point out that what to most people seems utterly banal can serve to lay bare the axis around which everything else rotates.

The image of the axis of rotation suggests that what turns around it forms a single connected structure. Other metaphors used by Wittgenstein point in the same direction, for example when he speaks of our knowledge as a system or of the scaffolding of our thoughts. The hinges he mentions serve as links connecting different parts of a whole ensemble, and the river of our first metaphor consists of an unceasing, steady flow of waters. Our knowledge, our world-picture,
forms a connected structure, a kind of building. But neither as individuals nor as a community are we likely to arrive at a complete view of the entire structure. All we ever manage to discern are scattered fragments that we tend to read as signs indicating a much larger whole. As Wittgenstein writes: ‘We believe, so to speak, that this great building exists, and then we see, now here, now there, one or another small corner of it’ (OC 276). Some of these corners, I think, display hinges as well as certain more or less mobile parts of the building connected by those hinges. Other corners are quite different. I should like to compare them with a device used by some architects who, while cleverly concealing the supporting structure of a building, apply to its front big girders made of steel or cast iron decorated with enormous nuts and bolts. The visible girders, however, do not support anything, nor do the nuts and bolts fasten anything. What they do is signal that this is a building held together by girders, nuts and bolts of great strength; but the girders, nuts and bolts you see are not the ones which do the actual work of holding fast what otherwise would collapse like a house of cards exposed to wind and all kinds of weather.

The visible girders, nuts and bolts are nothing but an architectural adornment. They are similar to the ornamental coping mentioned by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. This ornament, however, is by no means useless. Its hardness does not serve to lend support to the entire structure; but it indicates that the whole structure is well supported, if in a less obvious way. It is like the hardness of that type of bedrock which does not support my justifications by providing foundations on which these justifications can be seen to rest but betokens that I have arrived at the end of an interconnected series of justifications. This is the force of the famous image developed in the *Investigations* that I alluded to at the beginning of my observations. There Wittgenstein writes:

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’

(Remember that we sometimes demand explanations for the sake not of their content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one; the explanation a kind of ornamental coping that supports nothing.) (PI 217; I have changed the translation of ‘Erklärung[en]’ from ‘definition[s]’ to ‘explanation[s]’)

And now, I think, it is clear how we can reconcile the coherentist strands in Wittgenstein’s thought with his apparently foundationalist imagery. The real work is done by our ordinary empirical statements and the encompassing framework of actions, institutions and practices where no individual item enjoys absolute pride of place. To the extent these various items usefully contribute to this going concern they support
each other, and this mutual support requires a high degree of coherence. The items Wittgenstein is happy to include among the foundations, on the other hand, give no support to the structure of the entire ensemble; but they do satisfy, as Wittgenstein says, an architectural requirement. This requirement is an ‘architectural’ one in a prevalently aesthetic sense of that word. Foundations are here seen as part of the decoration of a building. But this decoration is not a mere embellishment; it helps us to ‘read’ a plan of the building, to understand the way its cohering elements are put together and held together.

The foundations of our system, our world-picture, come in the shape of odd commonplaces, truisms and platitudes of the most pedestrian kind. They do not satisfy our curiosity, nor do they contribute much to bolstering our more informative and more daring judgements and explanations. But the philosopher who knows how to read them aright is assisted by them in his attempts at describing the ways our language-games function. And as everything belonging to the description of the language-game also belongs, as Wittgenstein says (OC 56, 82, 628), to logic, these commonplaces too can contribute to our understanding of logic in the wide sense intended by Wittgenstein. If we want to compare our commonplaces to foundations, then these foundations are largely idle; they do little or no work. In particular, they do not carry anything in the way foundation-walls carry a building. If they can be said to carry anything at all, then it will be in the sense in which a wire carries electricity or the bed of a river carries water. Perhaps that is not much of an activity, but no doubt it is useful.

Notes

1. In view of the continuation of this paragraph it may be justifiable to use the word ‘foundation’. A more literal translation than Miss Anscombe’s would then run as follows: ‘I have arrived at the foundations of my beliefs. / And of these foundation-walls it might almost be said that they are carried by the whole house.’
2. This similarity in point of incontestability or unexceptionability is emphasized by Norman Malcolm, who refers to OC 54 and 56: ‘Wittgenstein is pointing out an analogy between propositions of arithmetic and empirical propositions. In each of these domains of language the truth of some propositions becomes fixed, unshakeable: the idea that one might be mistaken becomes inconceivable’ (1986, 210). The fact that we have to be careful when speaking of ‘empirical propositions’ in this sweeping manner is stressed below with reference to Wittgenstein’s own qualms about this notion.
3. Presumably Wittgenstein’s observation that ‘[d]er Begriff “Satz” selbst nicht scharf ist’ sounds less remarkable than the English translation. It must be remembered that in all his writings Wittgenstein refrained from drawing any
of the various systematic distinctions between ‘sentence’, ‘proposition’, ‘statement’, etc. that we have become so familiar with. He used the word ‘Satz’ and left it at that – or left it to its context to do all the desirable work of disambiguation. (Of course, one might wish to argue that, in the Tractatus at any rate, Wittgenstein distinguished between signs and symbols and that this distinction could easily be applied to sentences. In a way, this is right; but in the early book this distinction surely has a different function from that fulfilled by standard distinctions between ‘sentence’, ‘proposition’, etc. Especially in view of Wittgenstein’s willingness to distinguish between sign and symbol it may be regarded as noteworthy that he refrained from making a systematic distinction between sentences, propositions, etc.) It was in the course of a discussion at the Collège de France that Ian Hacking pointed out to me that emphasizing this point might be helpful.

4. Wittgenstein’s denial that the difference between assumption and certainty (in the sense of exemption from doubt) is a matter of degree – his denial that there is a continuum between them – is at the same time one of his ways of underlining the pointlessness of certain kinds of sceptical doubt: for doubt to make sense certain things one can say must be immune from doubt – doubt simply does not get a grip on these things, so scepticism makes no sense in these cases.

5. In a certain way this remark recalls Wittgenstein’s 1932 discussion of ‘hypotheses’ and his contemporaneous attempts at drawing a distinction between Hypothesen and Sätze (see note 3 – this reference to ‘hypotheses’ may serve to indicate that Wittgenstein’s use of the word ‘Satz’ is even more complicated, or erratic, than is suggested in that note). In a conversation recorded by Waismann (1 July 1932) Wittgenstein said: ‘On a field of ruins fragments of columns, capitals, pediments are dug up and it is said, That was a temple. The fragments are completed, gaps are filled up in the imagination, lines are traced. This is a likeness for an hypothesis. [DIAGRAM] An hypothesis differs from a proposition in virtue of its grammar. It is a different grammatical structure’ (Waismann 1979, 210).

But why *am* I so certain that this is my hand? Doesn’t the whole language-game rest on this kind of certainty? (OC 446)

1. ‘Objective certainty’

Wittgenstein’s last work\(^1\) was posthumously entitled *Über Gewissheit – On Certainty*. This is because certainty is the subject-matter of the work. In German, Wittgenstein speaks not only of *Gewissheit*, but also of *Sicherheit*, and he uses other equivalent expressions.\(^2\) Wittgenstein uses these terms in an attempt – inspired by G.E. Moore and Norman Malcolm’s discussions of the subject\(^3\) – to circumscribe the nature of our basic assurance, of our assurance about such things as ‘Here is a hand’ or ‘I am standing here’. At the very outset of his examination of that assurance, Wittgenstein dissociates it from knowledge: ‘If you do know that *here is one hand*, we’ll grant you all the rest’ (OC 1). But of course, he does not leave it there. Much of *On Certainty* is devoted to fleshing out the distinction between certainty and knowledge.

In the process of comparing and contrasting knowledge and certainty, Wittgenstein comes to distinguish *objective* from *subjective* certainty:

With the word ‘certain’ we express complete conviction, the total absence of doubt, and thereby we seek to convince other people. That is *subjective* certainty.

But when is something objectively certain? When a mistake is not possible. But what kind of possibility is that? Mustn’t mistake be *logically* excluded? (OC 194)

Subjective certainty is *not* what Wittgenstein is after. For, although the certainty he is striving to define is a certainty that stands fast for us
individually or personally (‘I act with complete certainty. But this certainty is my own’ (OC 115)), it cannot be merely personal: ‘But it isn’t just that I believe in this way that I have two hands, but that every reasonable person does’ (OC 252).

Complete conviction, the total absence of doubt, suffices for someone to be subjectively certain (OC 194), but there must be something beyond personal conviction if the certainty is to be shared by ‘every reasonable person’. If the claim to certainty is to be more than a subjective claim, the certainty needs to be objectively established:

Even if the most trustworthy of men assures me that he knows things are thus and so, this by itself cannot satisfy me that he does know. Only that he believes he knows. That is why Moore’s assurance that he knows … does not interest us. (OC 137)

It needs to be shewn that no mistake was possible. Giving the assurance ‘I know’ doesn’t suffice. For it is after all only an assurance that I can’t be making a mistake, and it needs to be objectively established that I am not making a mistake about that. (OC 15)

But what does it mean to objectively establish that I am not making a mistake about that? If all it is is to adduce compelling grounds for my conviction – ‘I have compelling grounds for my certitude.” These grounds make the certitude objective’ (OC 270) – then the claim to objective certainty is not really distinguishable from the claim to knowledge. Moreover, an objective certainty that is based on grounds – compelling or not – is susceptible to mistake: ‘For there can be dispute whether something is certain; I mean, when something is objectively certain’ (OC 273). The certainty Wittgenstein is seeking to define as objective, is objective not merely as opposed to subjective, but as in: not based on grounds at all. For once grounds are adduced, we are in the realm of knowledge and justification. Indeed, Wittgenstein adheres to the standard view of knowledge as justified true belief, and therefore considers not only the claim to knowledge, but also knowledge possession as conceptually linked to justification:

‘I know it’ I say to someone else; and here there is a justification. (OC 175)

Whether I know something depends on whether the evidence backs me up or contradicts me. (OC 504)

So that the only objective certainty that would be categorically distinct from knowledge is a certainty which would not depend on justification: ‘giving grounds … justifying the evidence’ has come to an end (OC 204). And
only *that* objective certainty is sufficiently – that is, categorically – distinct from knowledge whose imperviousness to mistake and doubt is not grounded at all, but *logical*:

The difference between the concept of ‘knowing’ and the concept of ‘being certain’ isn’t of any great importance at all, except where ‘I know’ is meant to mean: I *can’t* be wrong. (OC 8)

But when is something objectively certain? When a mistake is not possible. But what kind of possibility is that? Mustn’t mistake be *logically* excluded? (OC 194)

We can then conclude that although Wittgenstein *does* allude to a concept of objective certainty that is based on (‘compelling’ or ‘telling’) grounds (OC 270–1), he finds that it is not the type of objective certainty he is after. *That* concept of objective certainty – precisely because it is linked to justification – does not sufficiently differ from the concept of knowing (OC 8). Only that certainty which is *categorically* distinct from knowing – that certainty which entitles Wittgenstein to say that: ‘ “[k]nowledge” and “certainty” belong to different *categories*’ (OC 308) – because it is a *groundless, logical, nonepistemic* certainty will, henceforth in this chapter, be called: objective certainty.5

2. The depictions of objective certainty

As he endeavours to clarify the nature of our basic beliefs in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein speaks of them as propositions (e.g., OC 415), rules (e.g., OC 95), as forming a picture (e.g., OC 94), and as ways of acting (e.g., OC 110, 148) which are characterized as a *know-how* (e.g., OC 476). Listing the concepts and images Wittgenstein uses in his depiction of our basic certainty might well prompt suspicion as to their mutual compatibility. Granted, the propositional option is rejected (OC 204), but not the others. This leaves us perplexed: how can certainty be both a way of acting and a rule of grammar (OC 53, 57)? The perplexity partly evaporates when we realize that there is an attitude (act)/object ambiguity here. Wittgenstein, although he does not explicitly distinguish between the two, is in fact describing two things in *On Certainty*: objective certainty and objective certainties:

1. a *kind* of certainty (OC 406), whose nature is foundational; that is: *objective certainty*;
2. the ‘objects’ of that certainty, which I will call *objective certainties*, or *hinges*6 (e.g., ‘I have a body’, ‘The world exists’, ‘Here is a hand’).
But the ambiguity does not stop here. For Wittgenstein’s elucidation of (1), that is: of objective certainty, is itself effected from two different angles, or rather with two distinct philosophical aims. We might call one of the aims: phenomenological. Here, Wittgenstein is striving to describe what it is like to be objectively certain; to have an attitude of objective certainty. The other aim might be called: categorial. Wittgenstein is here seeking to determine what kind of certainty objective certainty is; where it fits in our doxastic\(^7\) categories. Objective certainty is then depicted

1a. as a doxastic category; a kind of certainty whose status or role in our system of beliefs is described as foundational or basic. Here, the *objective certainties* or basic beliefs, that make up the ‘scaffolding of our thoughts’ are recognized to be rules of grammar;

1b. as a kind of doxastic attitude, whose objects are foundational but (unlike the objects of ordinary belief) non-propositional. This attitude is best described as a kind of know-how, and its objects as belonging to grammar.

What we have in *On Certainty*, then, are two different descriptions of the same *objective certainty*: one elucidating the categorial status of objective certainty; the other its phenomenological nature.\(^8\) These two descriptions are inconsistent with each other only in that the images which respectively inform them are incompatible. As regards the philosophical elucidation of the concept of objective certainty, however, the phenomenological and categorial descriptions are not incompatible, but complementary. Let us briefly review these two complementary depictions.

2.1. The categorial description: objective certainty as a doxastic category: ground and background

Where Wittgenstein speaks of objective certainty in *foundational* terms, he can be said to be situating objective certainty in our system of beliefs, and attempting to determine its doxastic status. In his attempts at categorial elucidation, his observations are, more often than not, couched in foundational imagery or terminology: we are *at the ground*; have reached *bedrock*, *rock bottom*.\(^9\) The foundational metaphor, of course, harks back to traditional philosophy’s quest for certainty in the form of fundamental principles or axioms, something which Wittgenstein alludes to in his own quest: ‘We might speak of fundamental principles of human enquiry’ (OC 670). But Wittgenstein, we shall see, does not persist in this path.\(^10\)
At times, the *foundation* or *ground* becomes a *background*, and it is likened to a *Weltbild* or ‘world-picture’:

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false (OC 94)

But even this *background* or *world-picture* is depicted as a kind of *ground*: a ‘matter-of-course foundation’ or ‘substratum’:

... I say world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is the matter-of-course foundation for ... research and as such also goes unmentioned. (OC 167)

I have a world-picture. Is it true or false? Above all it is the substratum of all my enquiring and asserting. (OC 162)

All our enquiring and asserting; all our research; indeed all our language-games (OC 403); all our thoughts and actions (OC 411) are said to be based on this *ground*, or *background* or *world-picture*. To delineate the nature of our foundational certainty, Wittgenstein uses images that render its conceptual features, images that evoke

1. a basic or ultimate status (*foundation, ground, foundation-walls, scaffolding, bedrock, substratum, rock bottom, inherited background*)
2. a difference in nature from the rest (e.g., the foundations from the house; the background from the foreground; the bedrock from the fluid waters);
3. an unquestionable solidity, hardness, reliability, stability (*solid, hardened, standing fast, immovable, unmoving, anchored*)

Certainty, here, is described as something that, in our system of beliefs, *stands fast* (e.g., OC 116; 125) whilst all else is questionable or questioned; it is a *frame of reference* (OC 83), a *bedrock of hardened propositions* (OC 96), *rules* (e.g., OC 95, 98, 494); *norms of description* (e.g., OC 167) which are like the *hinges* on which the door of enquiry, of questions and answers, turns (OC 341). Wittgenstein’s likening our objective certainties to a *method* –

I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and inquiry. (OC 151)

– confirms that his conjecture that they should be conceived as grammatical rules (cf. OC 57–59) has evolved into a conviction. These
hinges – our basic beliefs – are the rules on which our language-games revolve; that is: rules of grammar.

2.2. The phenomenological description: objective certainty as a doxastic attitude: a taking-hold and a blind trust

Wittgenstein depicts objective certainty as a doxastic attitude (both as a disposition and as an occurrence), where he refers to it as a certainty or sureness; an assurance; a conviction; a being sure; a trust; a relying on; a belief; an attitude; a (direct) taking-hold; a holding fast; acting; a way of acting and speaking; something that we show or that shows itself in what we say and do. Our doxastic attitude here is not a belief that; as we shall see (in Section 4), it is depicted as a kind of animal trust, or belief-in, and its occurrent mode is described as a kind of know-how. Indeed, this ‘sureness’ resembles an unhesitating mastery; it ‘is just like directly taking hold of something’ (OC 510). And so, we might ask, what is that something here that is being taken directly hold of?

The phenomenological nature of our objective certainty seems at first to resist philosophical elucidation. It is not the attitude itself that resists description – indeed, we have just listed several expressions descriptive of it (e.g., a taking-hold, a holding fast, a trusting) – it is rather the object of this attitude that is difficult to pin down. We want to say that objective certainty is a doxastic attitude, but what is it an attitude towards, if not propositions? The categorial elucidation of objective certainty depicts its objects as rules of grammar. But do we have an attitude of certainty towards a rule of grammar? Can we say that the attitude of certainty that underpins our knowledge is an attitude we have towards rules? This may be so for such cases as: ‘2 + 2 = 4’, but what of such hinges as: ‘Here is a hand’ or ‘I am standing here’? Is my certainty, in each case, a certainty towards a rule of grammar? In the latter types of case, it would be more correct to say that we have an attitude towards objects (and this includes states of affairs and individuals) that belong to grammar; objects that are used as paradigms of our method of description. Such objects (states of affairs, individuals etc.) are, as much as samples or objects used in ostensive definitions, part of grammar.

Indeed, Wittgenstein stresses that our constitutive or definitional rules are not always in verbal form; nor do we always learn them verbally:

I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. (OC 152)

No one ever taught me that my hands don’t disappear when I am not paying attention to them. (OC 153)
Nor are these certainties ‘presuppositions’:

One cannot make experiments if there are not some things that one does not doubt. but that does not mean that one takes certain presuppositions on trust. When I write a letter and post it, I take it for granted that it will arrive – I expect this. (OC 337)

This expectation, like Moore’s certainty that ‘Here is a hand’ is a certainty towards some thing (or object of experience) standing fast, so fast as to belong to our method of description, to our rules of grammar. For, being some ‘thing’ does not preclude something from belonging to grammar. Indeed, Wittgenstein speaks of the objects pointed at in ostensive definitions as samples, in that they provide standards for the correct use of words, and he proposes we call them: ‘instruments of the language’:

What about the colour samples that A shews to B: are they part of the language? Well, it is as you please. They do not belong among the words; yet when I say to someone: ‘Pronounce the word “the”’, you will count the second ‘the’ as part of the sentence. Yet it has a role just like that of a colour-sample in language-game 8; that is, it is a sample [Muster] of what the other is meant to say.

It is most natural, and causes least confusion, to reckon the samples among the instruments of the language [Werkzeuen der Sprache].17 (PI 16)

A particular sample, say of colour, plays, like the standard metre in Paris, a ‘peculiar role’ (PI 50) in language:

We can put it like this: This sample is an instrument of the language used in ascriptions of colour. In this language-game it is not something that is represented, but is a means of representation. – And ... this gives this object a role in our language-game; it is now a means of representation. (PI 50)

Any means of representation (or as On Certainty puts it: ‘norm of description’ (OC 167)) – be it verbal or nonverbal; be it a sentence or an object – is ‘part of the language’ or ‘belongs to language’.18 By this, Wittgenstein means that it belongs not to the language game (as do things that are represented), but to what is instrumental to the game; a means to the game – that is: to grammar. So that just as a colour sample can be an instrument of the language or a means of representation; that is, just as it can belong to grammar, so can my hand or my standing here or someone laughing.19 In fact, any object or state of affairs can belong to grammar inasmuch as it used as a sample or instrument of the language;20 that is, inasmuch as
it functions as a *norm* of description (‘This ☞ is (what we call) a hand/standing/laughing’) rather than as, say, an *object* of description.

So although it may seem implausible to think of objective certainty as *in all cases* an attitude towards a rule of grammar, the implausibility disappears when we see that having an attitude towards some *objects* (e.g., things, individuals, states of affairs) is sometimes equivalent to having an attitude towards a grammatical rule. Objective certainty is a foundational belief in *something standing unshakeably fast* (OC 144), where ‘something’ refers to a rule of grammar or to an object of experience that functions like an instrument of grammar.

Once we realize that Wittgenstein is in fact describing the same concept from two different angles – objective certainty as a doxastic *category* and objective certainty as a doxastic *attitude* – we are no longer befuddled by the abundance of seemingly incompatible images. And we are lenient also, when these overlap. As in: ‘… it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game’ (OC 204).

### 3. Objective certainties

Objective certainty is *like a foundation*. It *stands fast* in order that things can be built on it; and it *comes first* (OC 354). It is like a foundation also in that it is made up of individual ‘building-stones’ (*Bausteine*: OC 396) – which Wittgenstein refers to as ‘propositions’ or ‘sentences’ (*Sätze*) (e.g., OC 95, 152); as ‘beliefs’ or ‘convictions’ (e.g., OC 144, 248). So that the solidity of the whole foundation or bedrock or background is really indissociable from that of its individual components: the bedrock is a bedrock of certainties, of hardened *Sätze* (OC 96); it is individual certainties that form the (metaphorical) structure: ‘my convictions do form a system, a structure’ (OC 102). Our *Weltbild*, then, can be dissected into individuated certainties (e.g., ‘The world exists’, ‘I exist’, ‘Human beings are not made of glass’), though this individuation does not imply that these certainties are assimilated individually. These certainties of my *world-picture* ‘hang together’ (OC 279); they are interwoven into a coherent network, and the loss of certainty in one of them affects the coherence of the whole:

> If I wanted to doubt the existence of the earth long before my birth, I should have to doubt all sorts of things that stand fast for me. (OC 234)

> When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (OC 141)
But this talk of propositions makes it seem as if what we assimilated were just that: propositions. In fact, we shall see that hinges are nonpropositional certainties that are formulated for heuristic purposes only, and that our assimilation of them is not propositional, empirical or epistemic.

OC 234 hints at another crucial feature of objective certainty: it is not a transcendent certainty (OC 47); what stands fast stands fast for someone (this is further discussed in Section 7). Although the certainty in question is termed objective, it is not ‘objective’ in the Nagelian sense – not a perspectiveless, impersonal objectivity. To depict objective certainty is to depict someone being objectively certain. The ground stands fast for me; I have a world-picture – the idea of having a picture itself presupposes an onlooker. So that to be objectively certain conceptually requires a vantage point. And yet, Wittgenstein wants to wean us away from the perceptual, intellectual, epistemological metaphors; he wants to push us towards the conception of this certainty, not as a seeing, but as a doing:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain ‘propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC 204)

He does this by using metaphors such as ‘grasping’ and ‘taking hold’, which evoke a practical stance. We shall see then that objective certainty can be assimilated to the category of belief inasmuch as, like ordinary belief, it is a disposition and an attitude; but it differs from ordinary belief in that it is a disposition whose occurrence can only be enacted, and an attitude which is non-propositional.

4. Objective certainty as a non-propositional attitude

4.1. A ‘taking hold’

I want to say: it’s not that on some points men know the truth with perfect certainty. No: perfect certainty is only a matter of their attitude. (OC 404)

As M.J. Van Den Hoven puts it: ‘In On Certainty Wittgenstein tried to break away from a philosophical tradition that construes our relation towards these certainties as being epistemic in nature: the basis is not something we know, but something we do’ (1990, 273). What kind of attitude then, is this, non-epistemic, non-propositional attitude? John Searle would call it a commitment. This is how he describes our
non-propositional certainty of, for example, the existence of the external world or of other minds; and this certainty is part of what he calls the ‘Background’: our set of abilities, skills, habits and stances that are not themselves Intentional states but enable Intentional contents to work in the various ways that they do (1983, 143, 158):

Realism, I want to say, is not a hypothesis, belief, or philosophical thesis; Realism is part of the Background in the following sense. My commitment to ‘realism’ is exhibited by the fact that I live the way that I do, I drive my car, drink my beer, write my articles, give my lectures, and ski my mountains. Now in addition to all of these activities, each a manifestation of my Intentionality, there isn’t a further ‘hypothesis’ that the real world exists. My commitment to the existence of the real world is manifested whenever I do pretty much anything. It is a mistake to treat that commitment as if it were a hypothesis, as if in addition to skiing, drinking, eating, etc., I held a belief – there is a real world independent of my representations of it. (1983, 158–9)

The absence of an hypothesis makes this commitment very close to what Wittgenstein calls a ‘direct taking-hold’:

- It is just like directly taking hold of something, as I take hold of my towel without having doubts. (OC 510)
- And yet this direct taking-hold corresponds to a sureness, not to a knowing. (OC 511)

This ‘sureness’ is not prefaced by a precursory thought or hesitation. Wittgenstein also compares it to an ‘utterance’, an ‘immediate utterance’, and this is meant to contrast it with a conclusion. Let us take the passage above from the beginning:

- If I say ‘Of course I know that that’s a towel’ I am making an utterance [Aüsserung]. I have no thought of a verification. For me it is an immediate utterance.
  - I don’t think of past or future. (And of course it’s the same for Moore, too.)
  - It is just like directly taking hold of something, as I take hold of my towel without having any doubts. (OC 510)

Indeed, Wittgenstein speaks of our objective certainty as ‘something animal’ (OC 359). By this, he means to distinguish this kind of assurance from a justified or pondered assurance. In contrast to the kind of certainty we come to – from reasoning, observation or research – this certainty is akin to instinctive or automatic behaviour: to a direct taking
hold or thought-less grasp. This is just the kind of propositionless commitment or nonpropositional attitude that Searle is describing.24 And Wittgenstein also describes our certainty in terms of our maintaining an immovable stance or attitude (Einstellung: OC 381, 404) in the face of opposition: ‘I should stay in the saddle however much the facts bucked’ (OC 616). This all-confident, yet nonpropositional, stance or commitment is then also a kind of blind trust.

4.2. A blind trust

Must I not begin to trust somewhere? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable: it is part of judging. (OC 150; my emphasis)

My relation to an unfounded objective certainty is that: it stands fast for me. To say that something stands fast for me is to say that I rely on it (OC 603); that I regard it as solid (OC 151); that I have an attitude of trust towards it. Wittgenstein calls objective certainty a trust (OC 603)25 in an effort to distance it from a reasoned belief. Indeed, we might say that objective certainty is a kind of trust or belief in, without that belief being reducible to a proposition.26 It is a non-ratiocinated and non-conscious trust, or ur-trust, that we share with neonates and animals.27 This trust is not experienced as trust, but rather shows itself in the absence of mistrust – that is, in our taking hold of something, directly, without any doubts – the way we take hold of a towel. In ordinary cases, there is no preliminary hesitation and making sure that ‘the towel is there’; that ‘it is something I can take hold of’. Nor do I systematically hesitate before sitting on a chair: ‘When I sat down on this chair, of course I believed it would bear me. I had no thought of its possibly collapsing’ (PI 575; my italics).

Certainty here is better described as the utter absence of doubt – ‘I had no thought of its possibly collapsing’ – than the lived experience of trust. So that the kind of certainty or trust in question here is what, after Austin (1962, 70), is called an excluder concept. Rather than affirm itself, it excludes something: ‘doubt’. Another way of putting it is that trust here is the default attitude, and any absence of it the exception. Here trust is, as it were, recessive – a background, default, unconscious certainty. Its default status does not mean that this certainty or trust is less effective or operative; but only that it is not a conscious experience. Indeed, this non-conscious trust shows itself in all our ordinary gestures and activities: as we wake up in the morning, glance at the clock, head for the shower, dress, eat, rush to work – all these activities, and the questions
that accompany them (e.g., ‘Is the clock slow again?’; ‘Will I be on time for my appointment?’; ‘Shall I walk or take a taxi?’; ‘Is the hot water off again?’) are poised on non-conscious and inarticulate certainties (hinges), such as: ‘A clock tells time’; ‘Time is how we measure the deployment of life’; ‘We have conventions about being on time’; ‘Walking is how I and most humans get from one place to another’; ‘The shower tap will not melt in my hands nor the towel disappear as I take hold of it’ etc. Some of these certainties (e.g., ‘A clock tells time’) may have been consciously assimilated at some point, either through training or repeated exposure, but once this assimilation is effected, the certainties are non-conscious, inarticulate certainties. They require no cognitive attention; are not objects of thought, but constitute the ineffable background of thought: the ‘matter-of-course foundation’ which ‘goes unmentioned’ (OC 167). This background is not a theoretical but a practical one. It is a background which in fact amounts to a seamless expertise: ‘... the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting’ (OC 110). Hinge certainty is not the product of an attentive or conscious attitude towards a hypothesis, but manifests itself as a flawless way of acting; as an expert and unhesitating grasp. Our not questioning, our trust or confidence, our certainty, takes the shape of a flawless know-how.

The relationship between a person and her background or Weltbild is a know-how. One knows one’s way about, not through any theoretical awareness or rational process – not through any knowledge that – but through a kind of thoughtless knowing how. This, however, is no run-of-the-mill, ordinary know-how; it is an objective know-how.

5. Objective certainty as a know-how or (flawless) way of acting

... the bus conductor, rushing through the aisle, tugging at the bell cord, calling out the bus-stops, is pure, hard, nothing can scratch him; no crack between his gestures and himself through which the slightest impurity might penetrate.

Nathalie Sarraute, Le Planétarium (my translation)

John Searle speaks of the ‘Background’ as a Background of abilities or know-how:

... a Background of abilities that are not themselves Intentional states. In order that I can now have the Intentional states that I do I must have certain kinds of know-how. I must know how things are and I must know how to do things, but the kinds of ‘know-how’ in question are not, in these cases, forms of ‘knowing that’. (1983, 143)
In another attempt to describe the constituents of the Background, Searle lists: capacities, dispositions, stances, ways of behaving, know-how and savoir-faire (1992, 196). Let us try and sort these out. Capacities are assimilable to dispositions; attitudes to stances. Ways of behaving, or what Searle also calls Background ways of behaving (1992, 77) are what Wittgenstein refers to as ungrounded ways of acting. These ways of acting are the occurrent version of our objective certainty, and Searle calls the manner of their occurrence a know-how or savoir-faire to evoke the expertise and smoothness that characterize it. We could say that the Background, on Searle’s view, is nothing but dispositions that can actualize themselves into outright know-how.\(^3\) One example should better illustrate what this means.\(^4\) Take our certainty that tables offer resistance to touch. Rather than say that we believe that tables offer resistance to touch – which would imply, on Searle’s view, an intentional or theoretical attitude – we should describe this certainty as a stance or disposition that I have towards tables and other solid objects: I expect (here, also, in the recessive sense of the term) tables to remain solid when I touch them, not to vanish, not to become human. And this non-reflective stance or disposition manifests itself in my ways of behaving which, when it comes to such certainties, are expert and smooth – a know-how: I know how to sit at a table, how to write on a table; I handle tables as solid, non-human, unthinking objects: I put stacks of books on them, fold them, build them, discard them; and all this, without a moment’s hesitation or attention. The occurrence of my certainty that this is a table is my handling the table expertly and thoughtlessly.

The thoughtlessness is important here; it not only calls attention to the non-propositionality of our objective certainty; it also underlines its resemblance to a reflex or automatic action. Indeed, hinge certainty is not a ‘heed concept’.\(^5\) Like that of instinctive and habitual actions, its manifestation does not involve any degree of attention. On the contrary, the presence of attention would be a sure sign that the certainty in question is not a hinge certainty. Indeed, where self-criticism and self-correction are attendant on ordinary know-how, the know-how of objective certainty is complacent and inattentive. No vigilance, no readiness to detect and correct lapses because there are no lapses. As Gilbert Ryle reminds us, to speak of ‘know-how’ is to imply success:

What is involved in our descriptions of people as knowing how to make and appreciate jokes, to talk grammatically, to play chess, to fish, or to argue? Part of what is meant is that, when they perform these operations, they tend to perform them well, i.e. correctly or efficiently or successfully. (1949, 29)
And in the novel from which the epigraph of this section is taken, Nathalie Sarraute speaks also of the ‘exceptional savoir faire’ and skill of the bus conductor. Yet whereas in ordinary know-how, there is self-regulation – the application of ‘criteria in the conduct of the performance’ (Ryle 1949, 40) – objective certainty is a know-how in which there is no room for improvement. Whether our primitive know-how be natural or conditioned, it is unerring. Objective certainty shares with ordinary know-how only its success and confidence, for only in objective certainty is the performance so natural and the confidence so utter that one plays the game with one’s eyes shut. And wins.

6. Objective certainty as a silent or ineffable certainty

The foundation for all our actions (OC 414) (including, of course, our language-games (OC 403, 411)) is, we have just seen, described in terms of acting. ‘Giving grounds, ... justifying the evidence, comes to an end’ and ‘it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game (OC 204). By this, Wittgenstein means that our foundational certainty is a practical certainty (not a theoretical or propositional or presuppositional certainty) which manifests itself as a way of acting (OC 7, 284–5, 395); but also that it can only manifest itself thus – that is, in action, and not in words; not in our saying it (though it can manifest itself in what we say):

‘I know that this room is on the second floor, that behind the door a short landing leads to the stairs, and so on.’ One could imagine cases where I should come out with this [wo Ich die Äusserung machen würde], but they would be extremely rare. But on the other hand I shew this knowledge day in, day out by my actions and also in what I say. (OC 431; my emphasis)

What Wittgenstein refers to as the rare cases where we would ‘come out with’, that is say such sentences as ‘I know that this room is on the second floor ...’ or ‘I know that this is a hand’, are cases where these sentences do not function as hinges (although they are identical in appearance to sentences that formulate hinges), but as conclusions or descriptions – that is, as empirical propositions. As, for example, in the following case: I am asked to identify what I see on a blurry photograph; and I say ‘I know that this is a hand because I saw it very clearly on another print of the same shot’. This is a case where my ‘coming out with’ such a sentence is meaningful; where the sentence is an informative description, an empirical proposition, that bears saying. Whereas in Moore’s circumstances, the same sentence did not bear saying. It was meaningless because it was useless.33 The sentence was doing no work; it
was idle. It did not describe anything that required description; it did not persuade anyone of anything they were not previously certain of; nor did it prove anything. Moore’s holding up his hand and saying ‘Here is a hand’ was not a demonstration, but a simple monstration – and all it showed was something that was never hidden. Meaning is use – where there is no use, there is no meaning. Hinges cannot be meaningfully said, but the doppelgänger of hinges can be – and we mistakenly take a hinge to be an empirical proposition simply because it has doppelgänger that have empirical uses.34

Primitive certainty, it turns out, is not only a blind trust, but also a silent trust; a certainty that cannot (as such) manifest itself verbally. Indeed, Ortega also notes the non-formulation of our primitive beliefs, and speaks of them as stillschweigend [silent].35 For Wittgenstein, however, it is not that our objective certainties are not usually said, but that they are logically ineffable: they cannot be meaningfully said qua certainties in the stream of the language-game. Articulating these certainties as such in the language-game is useless, pointless, meaningless, and its only effect is to arrest the game:

My difficulty can also be shewn like this: I am sitting talking to a friend. Suddenly I say: ‘I knew all along that you were so-and-so.’ Is that really just a superfluous, though true, remark?

I feel as if these words were like ‘Good morning’ said to someone in the middle of a conversation. (OC 464)

The articulation of our objective certainties, qua certainties, in the stream of the language-game does not result in a display of certainty, but in their being perceived as queer (OC 553); incomprehensible (OC 347); a joke (OC 463); a sign of the speaker’s being demented (OC 467). And far from contributing to the language-game, such articulation simply blocks it.

6.1. Saying versus speaking

Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it. (OC 501)

And that is why no such proposition as: ‘There are physical objects’ can be formulated. (OC 36)

In Wittgenstein’s technical vocabulary, to say means to make sense; not to define it. Whatever defines or enables sense is itself ineffable. This is why ‘There are physical objects’, like all hinges or grammatical rules,
cannot be *said*:

What belongs to the essence of the world cannot be expressed by language. For this reason, it cannot *say* that everything flows. Language can only say those things that we can also imagine otherwise. (PR I, 54, p. 84; Wittgenstein’s emphasis)

A grammatical rule cannot be *said*. This, however, does not mean that it cannot be voiced or spoken; indeed Wittgenstein himself clearly articulates in the following passage what he says cannot be said:

To be sure, I can say that this suit is darker than the other one. But I cannot *say* that one colour is darker than the other one. For this is of the essence of a colour; without it, after all, a colour cannot be thought. (WVC 55; my emphasis)

A grammatical rule cannot be *said*; it can only *show* itself *in* what we say and *in* what we do. When he writes that something cannot be *said*, Wittgenstein means that it cannot be part of the *stream* of the language-game; not that it cannot be uttered for heuristic purposes. Technically, for Wittgenstein, not everything that is *spoken* is *said*. Although he does not make an explicit distinction between saying and speaking, we have seen that Wittgenstein *explicitly* excludes some (spoken or written) sentences from the possibility of being *said*. I can *utter* (speak) grammatical rules (in order to transmit them to a child or foreign speaker; or, as a philosopher, for conceptual investigation), but I cannot *say* them (i.e., articulate them in a language-game as if they were informative or descriptive propositions). To say then that something is *unsayable* or *ineffable* (in Wittgenstein’s technical sense) is not to say that it cannot be *uttered* (spoken). We can use words; indeed, sentences; indeed, perfectly well-formed sentences, and yet not be *saying* anything; not be making sense:

... the words ‘I am here’ have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly ... . (OC 548)

When I say these words to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly, these words have no use, and therefore no meaning. I am not really *saying* anything, though I am speaking. If we distinguish between Wittgenstein’s technical use of *saying*, and his non-technical use – for which we might substitute the verbs: *speaking* or *articulating* – the apparent inconsistency in his *articulating the ineffable* vanishes. Although rules cannot (technically) be *said*, this does not mean they cannot be *articulated* or *spoken*. It is crucial, if we are to understand
Wittgenstein’s conceptual clarifications as consistent, that we not con- 
flate these two ways of articulating sentences: saying versus speaking.\textsuperscript{36}  
This distinction would also contribute to the demystification of the  
Tractarian saying/showing distinction and of what has been dubbed Wittgenstein’s ‘ineffabilism’.\textsuperscript{37}  

Some of our objective certainties are instinctive, whilst others are  
acquired, but the instinctive ones are not any less grammatical rules.  
Granted, mathematical equations and other linguistic certainties (e.g.,  
‘\(2 + 2 = 4\)’; ‘This is (what we call) a table’) are the prototypes of acquired  
hinges: they are explicitly formulated to instruct us in the use of words  
and numbers, but the certainty: ‘Humans have bodies’, though perhaps  
ever explicitly formulated as a rule, also conditions our use of words.  
Explicit formulation of our objective certainties is necessary only in the  
case of deliberate training/drill, as in teaching a child or a foreign speaker  
a grammatical rule; or as in philosophers attempting to determine the stat- 
us of some sentences (OC 467, 406).\textsuperscript{38}  
In any case, the formulation or articulation of hinges (grammatical rules) is not to be confused with the  
occurrence or manifestation of hinges. The occurrence or manifestation of  
our objective certainties, \emph{qua certainties}, is ineffable. My objective certainty  
is a dispositional certainty about certain things which can only manifest  
itself \emph{in} the way I act and speak about these things.

\subsection*{6.2. Occurrence versus formulation}

Were we non-human animals, it would be enough to say that objective  
certainty is a kind of non-propositional, inarticulate, animal trust in  
certain things. But we are animals endowed with a conceptual language,  
and hence our normally inarticulate objective certainties get articulated  
by philosophers eager to elucidate the nature of our basic certainty. In  
doing this, philosophers give verbal articulation to certainties whose ver- 
alization in ordinary discourse would be a sign of something gone awry:  

\begin{quote}  
I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again  
‘I know that that’s a tree’, pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone  
else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: ‘This fellow isn’t insane. We  
are only doing philosophy.’ (OC 467)  
\end{quote}

It must therefore be stressed that when such formulation occurs, it has  
an exclusively heuristic status: the status of a grammatical instruction or  
elucidation, not of an informative statement or of an objective certainty.  
A formulation of a hinge is never an occurrence of the hinge.  

Moore and Wittgenstein have given some of our non-linguistic  
certainties linguistic expression. Such a linguistic rendering is important – it
allows us to individuate and elucidate the objects of our basic certainty. But it is also misleading: it gives the impression that our basic beliefs are propositional, or epistemic or intellectual. Hinge certainties are not internal propositional or cognitive beliefs susceptible of inference. Hinges do not have a propositional form, be it internal or external: they are not implicit propositional beliefs that lie dormant in some belief-box until occasionally stirred to inform our external propositional beliefs. The hinge certainty verbalized as: ‘I have a body’ is a disposition of a living creature which manifests itself in her *acting in the certainty of having a body*. When asleep or unconscious, this certainty remains a disposition, but becomes occurrent in any normal use she makes of her body – in her eating, running, her *not* attempting to walk through walls as if she were a disembodied ghost. This occurrence of her certainty resembles an instinctive reaction, not a tacit belief. My hinge certainty that ‘I have a body’ is much the same as a lion’s instinctive certainty of having a body. In both cases, this certainty manifests itself in *acting embodied*; in my case, however, it can also manifest itself *in* the verbal references I make to my body.

Wittgenstein’s *phenomenological* description of objective certainty renders the mindless, animal certainty with which we move about in the world. His *categorial* description – his talk of ‘hinge Sätze’ – goes one philosophical step further. It attempts to elucidate the *status* of these enacted certainties – our mindless ways of acting – in our system of beliefs. So that whereas the phenomenological description remains at the animal level, at a description of our *practical* stance, with the categorial description, we are in danger of being seen gliding on an invisible bedrock of what have traditionally been called ‘tacit beliefs’. I urge that we refrain from this temptation, and that we understand these various philosophical elucidations as drawing the following picture: our basic certainty is animal or *practical* through and through. We can verbalize it, but this is something philosophers do in an effort to understand the nature of our certainty. The verbalization or formulation of an objective certainty is never an *occurrence* of objective certainty, but only a mere heuristic operation. Our objective certainty occurs or manifests itself exclusively as a know-how; a know-how which, for philosophical analysis, we depict by articulating into individuated certainties. Verbalizing these certainties makes us realize another thing about them: they constitute the ineffable underpinning of knowledge, description, inquiry. They are the invisible hinges upon which our questions revolve. They *condition* our acts and thoughts. This is precisely what grammatical rules do. It must be clear that Moore-type sentences and the formulation of hinges in *On Certainty*, and in this
chapter, are artificial verbalizations – not occurrences – of our primitive (animal or conditioned) certainties. What philosophers have traditionally called basic beliefs, and what Wittgenstein alludes to as ‘hinge propositions’, are merely heuristic, or artificial, verbalizations of certainties that can only show themselves – in what we say and do.

7. The objectivity of objective certainty: ‘It stands fast for me and many others’

Objective certainty is both a personal and a shared certainty. It is personal in that it stands fast for me that the world exists; it is part of my ground, of my background. Although the certainty here is complete – that is: objective – it is nevertheless my certainty: ‘I act with complete certainty. But this certainty is my own’ (OC 174). My relation to objective certainties is that they count for me as solid, unmoving, unwavering foundations underpinning all that I say and do. I do not contemplate these certainties unless it be, as I am doing now, to analyse their nature and their role in human life. They are the hinges upon which my thinking, inquiring, contemplating takes place. They are certainties for me, in that sense. In that, without them I could neither think nor act. Me, personally. I could not move were I not objectively certain that I have a body; I could not have meaningful transactions with other people were I not certain of what most words mean, or that people are biologically and in other ways similar. These are certainties that stand fast for me and play a role in my life, enabling me to be a normal, operative, human being. They count for me in that I could find myself bereft of one or more of these certainties, and it would affect my life, without anyone else finding themselves thus bereft. There is a personal relationship between me and my certainties; one that need not affect any other human being. But the importance of these certainties is also internally linked to their being shared certainties. Kevin Mulligan speaks of ‘shared or collective primitive certainty’ with respect to meaning, rule-following and rules (2002, 60). If, as Wittgenstein suggests, hinges are grammatical rules, then objective certainty, however personal or, in Mulligan’s term, ‘solitary’ (ibid.) an occurrence is never merely personal:

Instead of ‘I know …’, couldn’t Moore have said: ‘It stands fast for me that …’? and further: ‘It stands fast for me and many others …’. (OC 116)

The truths which Moore says he knows, are such as, roughly speaking, all of us know, if he knows them. (OC 100)
But it isn’t just that I believe in this way that I have two hands, but that every reasonable person does. (OC 252)

There is something universal here; not just something personal. (OC 440)

Although it is I who believes, we can only speak of ‘objective certainty’ where our certainty is, as Avrum Stroll puts it, both ‘objective and interpersonal’ (1994, 153).

Objective certainty is objective not as in: human-independent or perspectiveless: ‘It is objectively certain for me that the world exists’ is not to say ‘That the world exists is certain’. Two different senses of the term ‘certainty’ are being used here. The physical certainty that the world exists is not the kind of certainty Wittgenstein is concerned with in this work. Indeed, his insistence on distinguishing truth from certainty is aimed at resisting the interpretation of ‘objective certainty’ as qualifying what truly (or otherwise) mirrors the world. So much is Wittgenstein set against this interpretation that he goes as far as to refer to our objective certainty as a mythology (OC 95, 97). Our hinges are not reflections of how the world is; they are our fundamental Einstellungen (OC 404), but these attitudes are not grounded on or justified by how the world is. It may be true that ‘I am sitting here’, that ‘I speak French’, that ‘The world exists’, but as formulations of hinges, these sentences do not reflect truth; they merely formulate non-propositional beliefs. The notion of doppelgänger is useful here. The same sentence can have different meanings and statuses depending on context. The sentence: ‘I speak French’ can be used to inform someone that I speak French – and here it may be a true or false statement; but the same sentence (its doppelgänger) cannot be used to inform myself. As an objective certainty, as a hinge, it articulates no truth; it only translates my unjustified (to myself) certainty that I speak French. As a hinge, the sentence cannot be an object of knowledge or a description of facts; in other contexts, the same sentence can be a description of facts. In On Certainty, Wittgenstein is concerned with that and how we are certain of some things; how these things count as certain for us; stand fast for us – regardless of whether these things are (or not) certain tout court; whether they are or not facts. We are speaking here of an ‘inherited background’, not of a ‘view from nowhere’.

In this chapter, I have attempted to disentangle some of the visible and less visible knots which – as I have observed from my various formal and informal presentations of On Certainty – prevent a smooth reading of the work. I hope it can now be seen that although Wittgenstein conjures up a great variety of images and concepts in his efforts to understand a
certainty which appears to him both as rigid as a rule of grammar and as supple as a reflex action, this diversity is not an incoherence.

Notes


2. Such as *Bestimmtheit* (‘certainty’), *Versicherung* (‘assurance’), *Überzeugung* (‘conviction’), *(das) Sichersein* (‘being sure’), *unbedingt vertrauen* (‘trust without reservation’). For examples, cf. OC 30, 77, 425, 194, 86, 308, 337, 620. The most frequently used phrase is: ‘*es steht (für mich) fest*’: ‘it stands fast (for me)’ (OC 116, 125, 144, 151, 152, 234, 235).

3. *On Certainty* takes its impetus from G.E. Moore’s ‘Proof of an External World’ (1939) and ‘A Defence of Common Sense’ (1925). Wittgenstein’s interest in Moore’s work was reawakened by discussions with Norman Malcolm in the summer of 1949 in Cornell (Malcolm 1958, 87).

4. This is further discussed in Section 7.

5. Gunnar Svensson and Avrum Stroll also refer to that certainty exclusively as ‘objective certainty’ (1981, 84ff; 2002b, 4ff).

6. Inasmuch as hinges are not propositions, as Wittgenstein comes to see (OC 204), I will not refer to ‘hinge propositions’, but simply to ‘hinges’.

7. I use the term ‘doxastic’ exclusively as meaning ‘of, or pertaining to belief’ and to other kinds of assurances (e.g., certainty, conviction) which stand in opposition to ‘epistemic’, which is said of, or pertains to knowledge.

8. That objective certainty can be phenomenologically described does not imply that objective certainty is phenomenologically experienced.

9. Avrum Stroll (2003) has counted more than 70 entries (representing slightly more than one-tenth of the total number of entries comprising the text of *On Certainty*) in which Wittgenstein uses explicitly foundational language, though many more passages contain different locutions having the same foundational thrust.

10. As Avrum Stroll argues (1994, Chapter 9), Wittgenstein’s foundationalism breaks with that of tradition.

11. The background’s being inherited evokes its being unfounded or unjustified or non-ratiocinated; one merely receives it.

12. Avrum Stroll draws attention to this feature of Wittgenstein’s foundationalism by calling it a ‘rupturalism’, so as to contrast it more vividly with Quine’s ‘gradualism’ (1994, 167, 171–2), and with traditional foundationalism generally.

13. It must be clear that this comparison is to ‘constitutive’ (or definitional), not ‘normative’ rules, even in his use of the expression: ‘norm of description’ (*Norm der Beschreibung*) (OC 167).

14. See also OC 447–8, where Wittgenstein makes a rapprochement between Moore-type certainties and mathematical rules.

15. That Wittgenstein’s use of the word ‘method’ is an unmistakable allusion to grammar should be clear, but see, for example: ‘What belongs to grammar are all the conditions (the method) necessary for comparing the proposition
with reality. That is, all the conditions necessary for the understanding (of the sense)' (PG, p. 88). See also OC 318.

16. For examples of all of these, see OC 115, 233, 425, 511, 620; 194; 308; 603; 253; 404; 511; 173; 204; 395; 7, 285; 431.

17. Although Wittgenstein uses the German Werkzeuge as an image also of the different uses of language (e.g., descriptive, expressive, regulative), where the diversity of the different uses of words is compared to the diversity of tools in a toolbox (cf. PI 11, 23), this should not be confused with his use of it here, where it is the instrumentality of samples in the transmission of language that is in question. Indeed, in her translation of Philosophical Investigations G.E.M. Anscombe has marked the difference by rendering Werkzeuge as ‘tools’ in the first instance, and as ‘instruments’ in the second (although inconsistently: cf. PI 53). This, probably in keeping with Wittgenstein’s use of ‘Instrument’ in PI 50: ‘Dieses Muster ist ein Instrument der Sprache, mit der wir Farbaussagen machen’.

18. ‘I will count any fact whose obtaining is a presupposition of a proposition’s making sense as belonging to language’ (PR 45; my emphasis).

19. ‘What belongs to grammar are … all the conditions necessary for the understanding (of the sense)’ (PG, p. 88; my emphasis).

20. Whether deliberately or not; for rules need not be taught deliberately; repeated exposure can have the same effect as deliberate training, repetition or drill. For a discussion of the distinction between deliberate and nondeliberate training, see Pleasants (1996), 246; also Moyal-Sharrock (2004a), 108–9.

21. Though note that the Doppelgänger of a hinge can be articulated nonheuristically – depending on context, an identical string of words can constitute, for example, an empirical proposition, a fictional or an expressive utterance. This is further discussed in Section 6.

22. An account of the origin of hinges deserves much more elaboration than I can give it here: see Moyal-Sharrock (2004a, Chapter 5). Essentially, hinges are natural or acquired certainties, but what is essential to note is that even where hinges are acquired, they are not acquired propositionally or through reasoning, but through some form of conditioning – be it drill, training, repeated exposure.

23. For varying interpretations of the ‘transcendental’ nature of this certainty, see the chapters collected under the heading ‘Transcendental readings’ Part II of this volume.

24. Searle explicitly speaks of these ‘Background capacities’ as ‘not in propositional form’ (1992, 58).

25. For allusions to trust in On Certainty, see OC 150, 337, 509, 600, 604, 672.

26. So that in the sentence: ‘I am objectively certain that this is my hand’, ‘this is my hand’ expresses not a proposition, but a grammatical rule; and the kind of doxastic attitude in question (in spite of the misleading presence of the word ‘that’ in the sentence) is not a ‘belief that’, but a ‘belief in’.

27. And indeed, Wittgenstein’s use of the term ‘animal’ (OC 359) reminds us that we do share some of our objective certainties with animals: a dog shares with us the objective certainties: ‘I have a body’; ‘I cannot walk through walls’; ‘I need nourishment’; ‘I cannot fly’; ‘I must avoid jumping into fire’ etc. But the term ‘animal’ denotes ‘something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified’ – and can therefore be taken to mean either ‘instinctive’ or ‘conditioned’.
28. This thoughtless certainty, this going without saying or taking-hold is what Ortega y Gasset calls a taking-for-granted or counting on (rechnen mit) (1984, 19; 1937, 44). Searle also talks about the preintentional, non-theoretical, non-hypothetical, non-propositional commitment as a taking for granted; and this ‘taking something for granted’ need not name an intentional state on all fours with believing and hypothesizing (1992, 185). As Wittgenstein says: ‘it is not certain “propositions” striking us immediately as true’ (OC 204).

29. I do not consider the ‘practical attitude’ in question here as a psychological attitude, but as an attitude that is the product of training or drill, of automatic or instinctual action. This kind of practical attitude is not ultimately reducible to a propositional attitude; and no emotion or desire is necessarily associated with it. It is best thought in terms of an automatic, conditioned or reflex disposition or action.

30. We needn't, however, adopt Searle's view of the nature of dispositions. My use of the term ‘disposition’ should not prompt notions of ghostly properties or states-in-waiting, but merely of ‘a tendency to act or react in certain ways’.


33. ‘Suppose I say of a friend: “He isn’t an automaton” ’. – What information is conveyed by this, and to whom would it be information? To a human being who meets him in ordinary circumstances? What information could it give him? … / ‘I believe that he is not an automaton’, just like that, so far makes no sense. / My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul (PI, p. 178). Here, the uselessness of what is said (‘What information could it give him?’) is tantamount to the meaninglessness or nonsensicality of what is said (‘I believe that he is not an automaton’, just like that, so far makes no sense’). Also note that the certainty that the person is not an automaton is an attitude, not a thought (‘opinion’).

34. This, as I argue in Moyal-Sharrock (2000) is the category mistake of philosophical scepticism. The notion of ‘doppelgänger’ relevant here is also developed in that paper. The ineffability of hinges is spelled out in the next section.

35. For example (1937), 44, 45. Because these ‘beliefs’ are already there in the background, then as we begin to think, ‘we do not bother [pflegen] to formulate them in sentences’ (1937, 43: my translation); ‘… we would look in vain in our consciousness [Bewußtsein] for a thought expressing the conclusion that there, below, is a street; nor have we for a moment doubted it’ (1937, 44). As Den Hoven writes, it is their fundamental character that keeps us from formulating these beliefs (1990, 274).

36. As I argue in (forthcoming), it is this apparent inconsistency between saying and speaking that leads to the interpretation of the Tractatus as repudiating itself; see also Moyal-Sharrock (2004c).

37. Of course, this mystification is largely due to Wittgenstein himself, and his being mystified: ‘Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning’ (CV 16).

38. Though formulation of our basic beliefs by philosophers is not always acknowledged or recognized as the formulation of rules.

39. Of course, in the failure of proprioception, the belief is no longer occurrences. I discuss this pathology, described by Oliver Sacks in ‘The Disembodied

40. For example, ‘My back is sore’. This is of course, not the same as verbalizing a hinge: ‘I have a body’. One is nonsense, if used as an assertion. The other: ‘My back is sore’ is a description or expression, which uses the hinge: ‘I have a body’ as a grammatical, not a propositional, underpinning.

41. I leave open the question of whether we want to call these individuated certainties ‘rules of grammar’ in describing a non-linguistic form of life, such as that of non-human animals. Though it is clear that hinges or primitive beliefs also function in the animal form of life.
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Part II
The Transcendental Reading
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Wittgenstein and Classical Realism

H.O. Mounce

The dispute between realists and their opponents has a long history. In classical philosophy, the realists denied that order is imposed on the world by the human mind. Rather the mind can make sense of the world only because it partakes of an order which exists independently of it. This view was defended, for example, by the Pythagoreans, Plato and Aristotle. It was opposed by the Sophists and Sceptics, who argued that the measure of things is in the human will as it expresses itself through the individual, social consensus or the conventions of language. In short, man is the measure of all things.

The philosophy of the Middle Ages was dominated by the dispute between realists and nominalists. Our understanding of the world depends throughout on generality. We cannot characterize a particular object except as an instance of something more general. For example, if we call an object red, we characterize it through a quality that it shares with other things. But we do not have those other things in mind as a finite set. For if we characterize any finite set as red, we imply that it too has a quality which it may share with other things and so on indefinitely. Every scientific law is irreducible to any set of finite instances. For example, if we say that metal dissolves in acid, we refer to anything which counts as metal. However often we distinguish pieces of metal, our law will apply also to pieces not so distinguished. The same point may be illustrated by reference to teaching a child the meaning of a word. We teach a child the word red by showing him particular red objects. But the child has not acquired the word until he can apply it to objects other than those. Indeed he has acquired the word only when he can apply it to objects other than any object we show him. Now the nominalists argued that reality is essentially particular, that only particular objects really exist. On their view, the generality to which we have
referred belongs simply to the way that the mind deals with those particulars. The realists argued, by contrast, that the mind can deal in that way with particulars only because it reflects what is independent of itself and belongs to the nature of things. For were reality essentially particular, it would be inexplicable how the mind can deal with particulars in that way. It is obvious that this dispute, in its essentials, is identical with the one we have distinguished in classical philosophy.

We may find the same dispute running through modern philosophy, the philosophy since Descartes. There is, however, this difference. In classical philosophy, and for much of the Middle Ages, the anti-realist view was a minority one. In modern philosophy it is the view of the majority. This has been especially true in the late twentieth century. Nietzscheans, Deconstructionalists, Neo-pragmatists and Heideggerians, all argue, though in various ways, that objective order is a delusion and that man is the measure of all things.

In this chapter I shall consider whether Wittgenstein should be added to the above list. Many of his followers deny that his views are realist. They deny, also, it is true, that his views are anti-realist. Their claim is that he has undercut the entire dispute. The parties to the dispute – or so it is claimed – have in common assumptions that are in fact illusory. By exposing these illusions Wittgenstein dissolves the dispute itself. This claim has a disquieting feature which is not often noticed. The dispute, which I have so briefly sketched, covers some two thousand years and involves intellects hitherto considered among the greatest in the history of Western culture. It is of course conceivable that those intellects were in fact lost in illusion. But though conceivable, it is hardly likely. There is another disquieting feature. Wittgenstein’s views as they emerge, on this interpretation, seem to me, and perhaps to others, not to undercut the dispute at all. For they bear a striking resemblance to those advanced by one of its parties, namely, the anti-realists. Let us consider the matter in some detail.

We must begin by considering what are the illusory assumptions which, on this interpretation, are common to both our parties. Alice Crary, in a recent review, mentions two: ‘the idea of an external standpoint on discourse’ and ‘the idea that our discursive practices depend for their integrity on the existence of features of reality that transcend them and determine their correctness’ (2001, 258). Crary says that Wittgenstein has shown both these ideas to be illusory. There can be no external standpoint by which language may be compared with the world nor can language be grounded on features of reality which exist independently of itself. She says that the two ideas go ‘along’ with one another. At first one takes her to mean that the one entails the other.
One takes her to mean, in other words, that if we cannot attain an external standpoint in order to compare language with the world, then it follows that language cannot be grounded in the world at all. But that, as it stands, is plainly fallacious. Suppose, for example, that the connections which ground language in the world are not the product of ratiocination. Suppose, in other words, that they do not depend in the first place on our own reasoning. It is now irrelevant whether or not we can attain an external standpoint in order to connect language with the world. It is irrelevant, since the two are already connected.

The ideas to which Crary refers can go ‘along’ with one another, only given a further assumption, namely, that language cannot be grounded in the world unless it is we ourselves who ground it. It is fairly certain, however, that this is in fact her assumption. At any rate, given that assumption, her argument is sufficiently clear. Her argument is that realists and anti-realists both assume that the standards of correctness in our language cannot be objective unless they are grounded in an independent world. But this presupposes also that we ourselves can attain an external standpoint, for otherwise our standards could not be thus grounded. The anti-realist assumes that since there is no such standpoint, our standards cannot be objective. The realist assumes that since our standards are objective, there must be such a standpoint. But both assume that the idea of an external standpoint is intelligible. In this they are mistaken. The very idea is a mere illusion. Once we see this, the dispute dissolves. For we are now free to deny, with the anti-realists, that our standards have their ground in an independent world, whilst continuing, with the realists, to affirm their full-blooded objectivity.

I think that this is an accurate account of Crary’s argument but the argument itself is very far from providing an accurate account of classical realism. For example, she assumes that realists are committed to what she calls an external standpoint. But they cannot be thus committed unless they believe that it is we who ground language in the world. Now that is a remarkable view to attribute to classical realism, since it is an evident variation on the idea that man is the measure of all things. If it is we who ground language in the world, it is we who are the measure of language and, through language, of all things. In short, the view she attributes to classical realists is exactly the view they oppose.

On the realist view, we make sense of things only because we partake of an order (or forms of order) which exists independently of ourselves. Since it exists independently of ourselves, we cannot ourselves have produced it. For example, in our reasoning about matters of fact we employ the category of causality. But the category of causality is not itself the
product of our reasoning. We reason about whether a phenomenon has this or the other cause. But here we already employ the category of causality. It may be evident to us on reflection that we reason in this way but it was not reflection in the first place that enabled us to do so. Classical metaphysics, as it was practised, for example, by Plato or Aristotle, consists in making explicit features of reality which in ordinary discourse are only implicit. They are only implicit, because they do not depend on ourselves; they are not the object of our reasoning but what enable us to reason. Consequently we can find them only when, turning back in reflection, we acknowledge that our reasoning has its source in what is other than ourselves.

We may note another feature of Crary’s account. The relation between language and the world which she attributes to classical realism is a contingent or accidental one. Thus she attributes to realists the view that we may compare language with the world or ground the one upon the other. But this presupposes that the sense of language is independent of the world. For one cannot compare language with the world unless it already has a sense. In short, the sense of language does not depend on its being grounded in the world. But that, again, is the opposite of what realists hold. The existence of an independent world, for realists, is the very condition for the existence of objective standards. Deny the existence of such a world and you deprive those standards of their sense. Thus we may conceive of the world as existing independently of language but we cannot even conceive of language as existing independently of the world. It is language which is parasitic on the world, not the world on language. That surely is the essence of realism.

If we return, for a moment, to Crary’s argument we shall find that it depends throughout on the assumption that man is the measure of all things. For we are presented, in effect, with a dichotomy. Either we can transcend language and ground it in the world or our language is wholly autonomous; it is not grounded in the world at all. She nowhere considers a third possibility, namely, that language develops through our interrelations with an independent world. It is true that she concludes by rejecting the dichotomy as spurious and affirming the objectivity of our standards. But her argument in fact has relied throughout on that very dichotomy. Nor does she explain how our standards can be fully objective when it is not even intelligible to suppose that they are grounded in an objective world.

It will be useful to consider precisely what is spurious about the above mentioned dichotomy. It is of the form: either we can transcend our language or we are confined within it. That is spurious because it treats
language as though it were a barrier between ourselves and the world. In fact we come to a better knowledge of the world as we acquire language. Or, at any rate, it is through the concepts of language that we acquire a conception of the world and thereby come to know it the better. But when the relation is put in that way, who can suppose that our concepts (or language) are not grounded in the world. Were they not grounded in the world, how could they enable us to know it? A common-sense reflection will reinforce the point. At one time there was no language, for there were no human beings. Nevertheless the world existed at that time. In what else can the existence of language be grounded except in that world?

I mention Alice Crary’s views not because I wish to criticize her in particular but because they represent a tendency commonly found among Wittgensteinians. I have noted, for example, a persistent use of the above mentioned dichotomy. I can hardly document the point in short space but perhaps it will serve as an illustration if I consider the use of the dichotomy by Cora Diamond, one of the most distinguished Wittgensteinians. In her book *The Realistic Spirit* there is a section in which she criticizes C.S. Peirce’s defence of real generals (1991, 20). Peirce was one of the few philosophers in the nineteenth century who made an explicit defence of medieval realism. As we have seen, our knowledge presupposes generalities which are irreducible to any set of finite instances. A scientific law, for example, transcends any set of observations which may serve in substantiating it. Peirce argued that laws as framed by scientists presuppose that generality is real, that nature in short has a law-like structure. It is only so far as scientific laws reflect this structure that they genuinely count as such. Cora Diamond’s criticism of this view is roughly as follows. *Either* Peirce can establish the existence of real generals quite independently of scientific practice or he is himself relying on scientific practice, in which case it is idle for him to suppose the existence of what transcends the practice itself (Diamond 1991, 48–50). The argument has exactly the structure of our dichotomy. *Either* Peirce can altogether transcend scientific practice or he is entirely confined within it. There is no third possibility.

To get the measure of this view, let us take an example. Suppose an astronomer predicts an eclipse, years ahead. The prediction depends for its truth on the movements of the planets in relation to the sun. The movements themselves are plainly no part of scientific activity, for they are independent not simply of that activity but of human behaviour in any of its forms. Thus the sun and its planets existed many millions of years before there was a human species and will no doubt continue to exist long after that species has disappeared. Moreover they are entirely outside the control of any scientist. It follows that the astronomer’s
prediction depends for its truth on its conformity to what is independent not simply of that prediction but of scientific activity itself. Moreover suppose such a prediction should fail to conform, not simply on one occasion but on many. Suppose such failures proliferate throughout science. The effect would be to undermine the whole of scientific activity. Here already we can see that Cora Diamond’s dichotomy is spurious. There can be no sharp division between scientific activity and what exists independently of it. For conformity to what exists independently of it is the very condition for scientific activity.

But here we must anticipate an objection. Wittgensteinians often resort to a distinction between the framework of an activity and particular judgements made within it. The distinction is such that particular judgements are objective in the sense that they may or may not conform to an independent world. But they are objective only within the framework, which cannot itself be said to conform (or not to conform) to anything at all. On this view, for example, particular scientific predictions may be said to conform (or not) to an independent world but the same cannot be said about the basic principles of science itself. We may already suspect that this view simply offers us a different version of the very same dichotomy. But there is, in any case, another objection to the view, at least when it is offered in a Wittgensteinian spirit. For it is in evident conflict with the later views of Wittgenstein himself. Thus it is one of the most striking features of his later views (not simply in On Certainty but also in the Investigations) that he abandons the sharp distinction he made earlier between particular judgement and logical framework. Logic, he holds in his later work, depends not simply on definitions but also on particular judgements. Suppose, in a given activity, there is proliferating failure in particular judgements or proliferating disagreement about whether or not they have failed. The effect would be to undermine the sense of that activity. But that is identical with the claim that no sharp division can be made between the conditions for an activity and what exists independently of it.

Now Peirce’s argument presupposes the view we have found in the later Wittgenstein. There is no sharp division between the conditions for scientific activity and what transcends that activity. Thus Peirce’s argument is not that having first characterized science we must in addition assume the existence of real generals. His argument, rather, is that without real generals we cannot intelligibly characterize science. Scientific activity itself presupposes what exists independently of it. Deny this and you deprive the activity of its sense.

To show that Peirce is correct, let us contrast his view with the one commonly advanced by empiricists. On the empiricist view
there is nothing to causal law but empirical regularities from which we generalize in order to anticipate future experience. To see that this is fallacious, consider an empirical regularity in any phenomenon we know to be governed by chance. Suppose, for example, that a roulette wheel comes up with the number twenty three times in succession, which is not impossible. That regularity will provide no evidence at all for what will come up on the next spin. By contrast, the same regularity where we believe a phenomenon to be law-like may well provide evidence for which law governs the phenomenon. But that is because we already believe the phenomenon to be law-like. Note carefully the argument. The argument is not that empirical regularities which count as evidence need to be supplemented by law. The argument is that except as a manifestation of law, empirical regularities do not count as evidence at all. What is fundamental is not empirical regularity but the existence of law.

The empiricist view of causal law is the opposite of the truth. Law cannot be derived from empirical regularity. Rather an empirical regularity counts as scientific evidence only when it is seen as a manifestation of law. It is true that this is evident only on reflection. That is because our belief in law is not the product of our own reasoning. We believe in causal law because we participate in causal order, not because we have inferred it from the world. We cannot infer it from the world, for it is the basis of every such inference. But that is to confirm the realist view. The classical realist, as we have seen, holds that the grounds of our language depend not on our own reasoning but on our fundamental relations with the world. In consequence, they are implicit in our language and can be made explicit only on reflection.

We must now consider the extent to which the followers of Wittgenstein faithfully reflect the views of Wittgenstein himself. I have already suggested that in at least one respect they seriously misrepresent him. But I do not wish to suggest that their misrepresentation, even in this respect, is gratuitous. It is not sufficiently recognized that Wittgenstein’s thought was entangled from the start in assumptions which he inherited from nineteenth-century positivism. These assumptions persist and it is only his later views which can be associated unequivocally with classical realism. To appreciate this, we need to consider, if only briefly, the views of nineteenth-century positivism.

They present us with what might serve as the paradigm of nominalism. On the positivist view, all knowledge is derived from the empirical sciences. The basic science is physics; there is a unity of scientific method. This means that all explanations must be reducible, at least in principle, to those in physics. All relations, for example, must be
reducible, in principle, to particular relations between particular objects, for those are the relations which physics explains. The objection to this is the one raised by C.S. Peirce. Physics explains the relations between objects by means of causal law. But causal law is irreducible to any finite set of objects. Positivists handled this objection by means of an absolute distinction between logic (or concept) and fact. Thus in the world it is only empirical regularity which answers to causal law. It is true that causal law is not reducible to empirical regularity. But that is because a causal law is not a statement about the world. Rather it is a rule by which we may infer the occurrence of future events on the basis of empirical regularities. In short, it belongs not to the facts but to the way we deal with them, not to the world but to our method of representing it. The move, it may be noted, is exactly that of the medieval nominalists.

Logical necessity the positivists handled in a similar fashion. Roughly speaking, logical necessity reflects the rules for our use of words. In short it belongs to our methods of representing the world, not to the world itself. They resorted to the same distinction in order to explain the task of philosophy. At first sight, it may not be easy to see how the positivists can assign philosophy any task at all. For it is essential to their view that only the empirical sciences can afford knowledge of the facts. They argued that the task of philosophy is negative not positive. Its aim is to clarify the empirical sciences by removing from them all metaphysical confusion. They had a ready explanation for how such confusion arises. It arises from attributing to the world what really belongs to our methods of representing it. The task of philosophy is achieved precisely when, through clarifying our methods of representation, it dissolves such confusion.

In all this, however, there is a difficulty which positivists themselves did not appreciate. As we have seen, their way of distinguishing between concept and fact depends crucially on the idea of a rule. A rule is general. The positivists have no right to this notion unless they can elucidate it in nominalist terms. They need to show, in other words, how generality can be explained in terms of the particular relations between particular objects. The positivists did not see this, for they assumed that a rule can be fixed by particular samples. For example, one may teach a child the meaning of red by giving him a sample of the colour. He may then go on and pick out other instances. The process seems self-explanatory. There can be no difficulty – or so it seems – in understanding how a child can follow the sample, since the sample itself directs him how to do so. On reflection, however, it may occur to us that the child cannot follow the sample correctly unless he goes on in some ways as distinct from others. If we now wonder why it is those ways which are
incorrect and not these, we can hardly resolve our difficulty simply by referring to the sample itself. As we shall see, the idea of following a rule is fundamental in the development of Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

But first we must consider Wittgenstein’s earlier views as they are expressed in the *Tractatus*. In this work, the influence of positivism is apparent at numerous points. Thus a philosopher’s statement is meaningful only so far as it conforms to the language of science (6.54). But in so far as it conforms to the language of science it is not philosophical. It follows that philosophy is an activity rather than a body of doctrine, its aim being to clarify the confusions involved in traditional philosophy or metaphysics. Causal necessity is treated as a superstition. Nothing in the world answers to causal law except empirical regularity. The meaning of a proposition depends on its atomic elements. These elements consist of names which stand for objects; the meaning of a name is the object for which it stands. So far the work is entirely positivist. For example, the naming relation is treated on the model of a relation between particular physical objects. One object, the name, stands for another. The relation involves only two elements. C.S. Peirce had already shown that this view is fallacious. Three elements are always involved in a relation of meaning. Thus a name can refer to an object only if there is already a way of so taking it. The way of taking a word is always general. In short, it cannot be reduced to a particular relation between particular objects. Wittgenstein later said that he had confused the meaning of a name with its bearer.

Someone who was familiar with the *Tractatus* only in its above aspects would be forgiven for supposing that he was dealing with yet another development of nineteenth-century positivism. He would be very greatly astonished on encountering the other, more fundamental, aspects of the work. Thus although Wittgenstein adheres throughout to an absolute distinction between logic and fact, he certainly does not treat logic as a mere reflection of linguistic rules. Quite the contrary, logic reflects the structure of the world. Positivism gives way to the purest realism. Moreover, as in classical realism, the relations between language and the world, the very conditions of sense, are only implicit in the use of language itself. That language is related to the world shows itself in the reality of logic. But that in its turn shows itself not in what we say about logic but in what we say about the world. There is here a profound connection between the *Tractatus* and the greatest works in the classical tradition. For example in Plato the Forms are the symbol for objective order. We know the Forms are real not because we can prove it but because they are the condition for our proving anything at
all. But then, by that very token, whenever we prove anything at all, we show the reality of the Forms. Similarly in the Tractatus we show the reality of logic in whatever we say about the world.

The difficulty is to see how these aspects of the Tractatus, which seem to me genuinely profound, cohere with the others. The difficulty is real, not merely apparent. The Tractatus does not form a coherent whole. We may mention the most obvious difficulty. Not only does Wittgenstein adhere to an absolute distinction between logic and fact but he treats the language of science as alone intelligible. This means that none of the fundamental relations between language and the world can be made explicit even on reflection. The obvious difficulty is that the Tractatus itself is a sustained and explicit reflection on those very relations.

In the late ’20s or early ’30s, Wittgenstein rejected some of those elements in the Tractatus which are most evidently positivist. For example, he rejected the view that the meaning of a proposition depends on its atomic elements. It is sometimes said that he replaced it with a verification theory of meaning. That is not strictly true. The view Wittgenstein adopted was that the meaning of a proposition depends not on atomic elements but on its relations with other propositions within a system. In effect, however, the view amounts to a verification theory. To appreciate this, we need to recognize a point that has been well emphasized by Bernard Harrison (1996, 105). It is often claimed that Wittgenstein, at this time, replaced the realist view of meaning which he held in the Tractatus with an anti-realist or anti-foundationalist one. As Harrison says, this is a radically mistaken view of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Throughout his philosophy, the sense of language and its relation to the world are taken as one and the same. To elucidate the one is to elucidate the other. Thus his analysis in the Tractatus is rejected not because it related language to the world but because it fails to do so. The very idea of a proposition as related to the world through its atomic elements turns out to be illusory. We know on reflection that language cannot be related to the world in that way. What Wittgenstein was seeking, in the late ’20s or early ’30s, was another way to elucidate the relation.

The point will be readily appreciated if we see why Wittgenstein introduced the idea of verification. As is well known, he became dissatisfied with his earlier view through his reflecting on the notion of colour. To say that an object is red is to imply that it is not green, yellow, and so on. This suggests that any given colour proposition derives its sense from its relations to a whole system of such propositions, so that we need to grasp the whole system in order to understand any one of them. But I can grasp the inferential relations between words without knowing
the meaning of the words themselves. For example I can know that ‘This is red’ excludes ‘This is green’ and still not know what is green and what is red. To know this, I have to know what in the world counts as the one or the other colour. Thus the words are grounded in the world, have a sense, through a technique or method of verification. Indeed it is the technique which, in giving the words their ground, determines also their inferential relations. This is most easily explained by one of Wittgenstein’s favourite examples, namely, that of a measuring rod. If the end of an object is aligned with the \(\frac{3}{110}\) mark on a measuring rod it counts as \(\frac{3}{110}\) long. But this is true only if the measuring rod as a whole is correctly aligned. Once it is correctly aligned we can see that an object counts as \(\frac{3}{110}\) long only if it can be aligned with none of the other numbers on the rod. In short, any given number signifies only by excluding all the others. That is why I can infer that if an object is \(\frac{3}{110}\) long it cannot be \(\frac{6}{110}\) long. Its not being \(\frac{6}{110}\) long is part of what counts as its being \(\frac{3}{110}\) long.

The view, however, has disquieting consequences. The different systems of propositions being defined by their own methods of verification are logically distinct from one another. Language, therefore, must consist of a plurality of logically independent systems. This view has been well criticized by Rush Rhees. As he says, the interrelations between different forms of speech are as important as their differences. For example, the force of an expression, in a given context, may depend on its use in other and very different contexts. That in itself should reveal that the sense of language depends on something more fundamental than any technique or method of verification. But there are other consequences. Since it is through a method of verification that language is grounded in the world, no method of verification can itself be grounded. Each method in a sense is arbitrary. This leads to a disquieting relativism. For example, the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems in astronomy differ not simply on this or that issue but in method and concept. Given Wittgenstein’s view at this time, it should be unintelligible to assert that the Copernican is the superior system, unless this simply means that it is the more convenient one to adopt. Here Wittgenstein’s view threatens to turn, in spite of his intentions, into a species of anti-realism.

These consequences are indicative of a fundamental confusion in Wittgenstein’s view. This confusion arises from the assumption that the correct application of terms must be fixed beforehand, prior to any application. The confusion is hard to remove because the assumption seems obviously true. How else can terms be meaningfully applied unless they already have a meaning? How can they already have a meaning unless their reference has been fixed beforehand by ostensive definition, by
pointing to samples or by some method of verification? Here, too, is the basis for an absolute distinction between logic and fact. Logic it seems must be prior to all factual judgement. For every factual judgement already depends on logic for its meaning.

In fact, if we consider the matter carefully, we shall see that definition, whether by a sample or by a method of verification, is a secondary phenomenon and cannot in itself elucidate the relations between language and the world. Thus a definition normally presupposes words already in use and when we consider those words, in their turn, we find that they depend for their sense on behaviour which does not depend on language at all. If we follow this line, we shall become clearer about the relations between language and the world.

We may illustrate the point by returning to an earlier example. As we have said, it is by showing a child samples that we teach him the meaning of the word ‘red’, but he has acquired the word only when he applies it to instances other than those we have shown him. Here already it should be evident that our performance, in showing him samples, depends for its sense on behaviour in the child which he could not have acquired simply from our performance itself. Through our samples he acquires the whole use of the word. But the whole use of the word is assuredly not contained in those samples. Nor do we give samples as a mere substitute for what otherwise we might have given in more detail. For example it is not that we might have formulated all the instances of red, but give samples because we wish to save time. For we have no idea how to formulate all those instances. Nevertheless we are certain, often enough, that a child has in fact acquired the whole use of the word. We are certain, in short, that he will continue to apply it to an indefinite range of instances for the rest of his life. Here surely it is evident that our performance depends for its sense on more than we, or the child, can formulate. Indeed it should be evident that the child’s behaviour does not itself depend on language. Rather it is language which depends for its sense on such behaviour.

We might also have said that it is through such behaviour that language is related to the world. We cannot see the relation between language and the world if we confine our attention to words themselves. The use of words is a form of behaviour which depends for its sense on behaviour other than the linguistic. Thus when a child learns the use of words he is already related to the world in his behaviour. We teach him the words for colours only when it already makes a difference to him whether an object is one colour rather than another. We teach him what is a cause and what is an effect only by drawing his attention to those circumstances in which he can already anticipate an occurrence. Words
have sense for the child only where their use is a development of how he already behaves or of what already interests him. Otherwise, they would be for him mere sounds, having no relation to the world.

In his later work, Wittgenstein illustrated the above point by reference to what he called ‘primitive reactions’. For example, a child does not need language to anticipate what will happen if he touches this flame. He has been burned once and does not risk it a second time. Wittgenstein called such an attitude ‘primitive’ and ‘a reaction’, because he wished to emphasize that it is not the product of prior reasoning or of what we formulate and because he wished to emphasize, also, that we shall be clearer about how language is related to the world if we see it as an ‘outgrowth’ from such attitudes. In this, let it be noted, he was not speculating about the origins of language. His concern, throughout, was with what it is for language to have sense or to refer to the world. He takes language in its development because he is interested in what has developed not because he wishes to find out how it did so. Developments are of no interest except in so far as they help us to remove confusions about language itself. In other words, he was concerned with philosophical logic not with amateur linguistics or developmental psychology.

Nevertheless ‘primitive’ and ‘reaction’ are misleading terms. For people take them to refer to what is blind or mechanical. That is radically erroneous. All human activity is intentional, in the technical sense that it cannot be reduced to mechanical movement. The child’s attitude to the flame provides a good example. A mechanical movement repeats itself in identical circumstances. The child, by contrast, does not repeat on the second occasion what he did on the first. He ‘reacts’ precisely by not touching the flame. He learns from the first occasion. On the second, he anticipates what will occur. Here we may see the kinship between Wittgenstein’s later views and classical realism. Thus we cannot characterize the child’s behaviour without resorting to what Peirce called real generals. For example the burn he anticipates on the second occasion is certainly not the one he received on the first, for that one no longer exists. Nor is he anticipating some other particular burn. Rather, he anticipates one of the same sort. In short, his attitude to the world already exhibits real generality, so that without resorting to a general we cannot even characterize it. Here surely we see the absurdity of supposing that it is we ourselves who project order on the world. We could not have produced any order unless our relations with the world were already ordered. That is the very condition for linguistic order or sense. The linguistic everywhere presupposes an order which goes beyond itself. That surely is the essence of classical realism.
If we now reconsider the development we have sketched, we shall find that Wittgenstein has moved through three phases. In the *Tractatus*, language is related to the world because its structure reflects that of the world, independently, as it were, of human interference. In the early ’30s, the relation between language and the world is elucidated through human behaviour. But the behaviour is primarily linguistic. Language is grounded in the world through the rules or methods which we frame for applying it. In the last phase, rules or methods are seen as secondary phenomena. A linguistic rule depends for its very sense on the way it is taken and for the way it is taken there can not be another linguistic rule, and so on ad infinitum. ‘What use is a rule to us here? Mightn’t we (in turn) go wrong in applying it?’ (OC 26). Linguistic behaviour presupposes the non-linguistic. Speaking derives its sense from a context wider than speech itself.¹ The point, let it be noted, is a *logical* one. It is not that linguistic behaviour has a sense which happens to have arisen in this way but might have in some other. It has sense only in this way; it has no other relation to the world. It is evident therefore that there can be no absolute distinction between logic and fact. For there can be no absolute distinction between logic (or language) and the world.²

It will help in reinforcing the above points if we give some detailed attention to Wittgenstein’s last work, the remarks entitled *On Certainty*. The remarks were occasioned, at least indirectly, by G.E. Moore’s papers ‘Proof of an External World’ and ‘A Defence of Common Sense’. In the latter paper, Moore gives a list of propositions each of which he claims to know with certainty: ‘There exists at present a living human body, which is *my* body’, ‘Ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth’, ‘But the earth has existed also for many years before my body was born’, and so on. In the former paper, he offers a proof of ‘things outside us’ by holding up his two hands and saying ‘Here is one hand and here is another.’

‘If you do know that here is one hand,’ says Wittgenstein, ‘we’ll grant you all the rest’ (OC 1). In other words, someone who doubts the existence of the physical world is not likely to scruple at doubting the existence of Moore’s hands. Moreover one who readily acknowledges the existence of his hands is not likely in the first place to doubt the existence of the physical world. In short, Moore’s whole performance seems comically inappropriate. There is, for example, such an evident disproportion between what is covered in his conclusion and what he marshals in its support. Nevertheless Wittgenstein believes that Moore has hit on something important. It is not important that Moore knows what he claims to know but that if he knows it so does
everyone else. Thus in normal circumstances, it is not simply that we do not doubt the existence of our hands but that we should have difficulty in stating what would count as such a doubt. For example, suppose I look down and do not see them. Should I conclude they do not exist? Why should I not conclude there is something wrong with my eyes? Should I use my eyes to test the existence of my hands or the existence of my hands to test my eyes? What is interesting and important is that our not doubting in those circumstances has a force akin to the logical. For were we to doubt we should throw into question what is or is not a test. We should throw into doubt what is to count as true or false.

At OC 56, Wittgenstein says that ‘everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic’. Now consider the following proposition. ‘In our practice or language-game some things are not doubted. For example in normal circumstances no one doubts whether he has two hands’. Here we characterize our language-game. Therefore our proposition is part of logic. But it is very different from what passes as a logical proposition in a logic text book. The positivists would have said that it is an empirical proposition, for it is a proposition about the world. Here we have a conception of logic radically different from what we find in positivism. Moreover it is radically different from what we find in the Tractatus or in Wittgenstein’s philosophy during the early ’30s.

We may illustrate the same point by reference to Moore’s propositions in ‘A Defence of Common Sense’. Take, as an example, the proposition that the earth has existed for many years. Now consider the following proposition. ‘In geology the earth is always treated as having existed for an immense stretch of time.’ Here we have a proposition which, characterizing a practice, counts as a logical one. To see this, suppose geologists became uncertain in the attitude described. That uncertainty would run through everything else that geologists assert. The proposition does not characterize the practice as a whole. For example, suppose two geologists differ over whether a rock formation is 500 million or 800 million years old. Each of their assertions entails that the earth has existed for an immense stretch of time. But given that the earth has thus existed, we still do not know whether that rock formation is 500 or 800 million years old. Nevertheless the proposition indicates what in the practice is fundamental. It elucidates the foundations of the practice itself. Nor does it do this by describing what geologists say. What geologists say, is, for example, that a rock formation is 500 or 800 million years old. Rather it elucidates the foundation of the practice by describing what shows itself in everything they say. Those last sentences, it may be noticed, are reminiscent of the Tractatus. But here we are on the edge
of a controversy. Wittgenstein likens propositions such as Moore’s to hinges on which a door turns:

That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (OC 341)

In consequence, these propositions have been called ‘hinge propositions’ and there has arisen a controversy, which threatens to prove endless, over their precise nature or status. I believe this whole controversy rests on a misconception. It arises because people approach On Certainty having in mind Wittgenstein’s earlier views. They are then mystified when they encounter elements in the work which are quite inconsistent with the views they take him to hold. So-called ‘hinge propositions’ are one such element.

To see why this should be so, let us return for a moment to the views Wittgenstein held in the early ’30s. At the time, as we have said, he held that a proposition has sense only as a move within a system of propositions. Associated with this was a certain conception of philosophy. Philosophical propositions were treated as confused or meaningless. They arise when words, as it were, ‘go on holiday’, being no longer connected with a system of propositions. Philosophical confusion is removed when this is made clear. We show, in other words, that the philosopher has failed to make a genuine move within any system of propositions.

Having this view in mind, one will certainly be mystified by the so-called hinge propositions. For although they indicate what is fundamental in a practice, they cannot count as a move within it. For example, what geologists assert are propositions such as ‘This rock formation is 800 million years old.’ They do not assert ‘The earth has existed for an immense stretch of time.’ On the earlier view, the latter assertion should count as confused or meaningless. The mystery is resolved, however, once one recognizes that On Certainty, in its main drift, constitutes a break with those views. The later view, as we have said, is that speaking derives its sense from a context wider than speech itself. Linguistic behaviour presupposes the non-linguistic. Given this view, it evidently follows that a philosopher who wishes to illuminate the fundamental features of a practice will describe precisely those features which are not explicitly stated. For otherwise what is fundamental in a practice would be the words uttered, whereas on the later view they are not fundamental. What is fundamental is the behaviour which gives them their sense.

‘Hinge propositions’ are readily understood once they are seen not as propositions existing unstated in a practice but as what a philosopher
would say who wished to make explicit its essential features. ‘Geologists treat the earth as having existed for an immense stretch of time’ is not what geologists themselves say. But it is what a philosopher would say who wished to make explicit an attitude among geologists which is essential to their practice. We can illuminate the point by returning, once again, to classical realism. As we said, in discussing the view, what is fundamental in a practice is only implicit in the practice itself. Just as in vision, what enables us to see is not the primary object of sight, so in knowledge generally, what enables us to understand the world is not the primary object of understanding. It was the aim of classical metaphysics to make explicit what is not primarily so. Classical metaphysics, let it be emphasized, is not, as is vulgarly supposed, an attempt to transcend the human condition by attaining an external standpoint. It is an attempt to illuminate that condition by making explicit what is only implicit in the condition itself. In this respect, as in others, Wittgenstein’s later views are identical with those of the classical realists.

The above point will be entirely evident if we remove one final misconception. In some remarks Wittgenstein says that our practices are not based on grounds. Here are two examples.

You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable).

It is there – like our life. (OC 559)

The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing. (OC 166)

It is important to see that where Wittgenstein uses the term ‘ground’, not simply in those passages but in every other, he has in mind the relation between ground and consequent. In short, he has in mind only a relation of inference. The consequent is derived from its ground. The ground is the base from which the consequent is inferred. Once this is appreciated, the meaning of the above passages becomes clear. Wittgenstein is making the point which by now has become familiar. Language is not inferred from the world. It is not the product of our reasoning. This is evident at OC 475: ‘Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.’

It is important to make this clear because passages such as those above are sometimes quoted as evidence that Wittgenstein in On Certainty was advancing anti-realism or anti-foundationalism. In short, Wittgenstein denied – or so it is claimed – that language is any sense grounded in the world. The claim, as it stands, is hardly plausible. For in several remarks
Wittgenstein makes it explicit that language is not in that way autonomous. Indeed some of his remarks are plainly realist. The following are examples.

It is always by favour of Nature that one knows something. (OC 505) Certain events would put me into a position in which I could not go on with the old language-game any further. In which I was torn away from the sureness of the game.

Indeed, doesn’t it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts? (OC 617)

We may note also that Wittgenstein, in one remark, uses an argument traditional among classical realists in opposing philosophical scepticism. The argument, roughly, is that such scepticism depends, for what sense it has, on tacitly presupposing the existence of an independent world. For otherwise there would be nothing to be sceptical about.

‘But I can still imagine someone making all those connexions, and none of them corresponding with reality. Why shouldn’t I be in a similar case?’

If I imagine such a person I also imagine a reality, a world that surrounds him; and I imagine him as thinking (and speaking) in contradiction to this world. (OC 595)

We may note, further, that Wittgenstein, in some twenty remarks, himself refers to the foundations of language. That is hardly consistent with his advancing anti-foundationalism. Indeed one might be forgiven for supposing that one of his main aims in On Certainty is to make clear where the foundations of language lie. Here are some examples:

Something must be taught as a foundation. (OC 449)

I say world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is the matter-of-course foundation for his research and as such also goes unmentioned. (OC 167)

It is sometimes argued, however, that Wittgenstein gives ‘foundation’ a special use whereby he deconstructs the term in its ordinary sense. In short, in the traditional sense, it is not a foundation at all. There are two passages which give some substance to this interpretation:

I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility. (OC 152)
I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions.
And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried
by the whole house. (OC 248)

On the interpretation we are considering, these passages show that
Wittgenstein is reversing the relation which normally holds between a
foundation and what it supports. For here the foundation is carried by
the practice. In other words, it is not the foundation which supports the
practice, but the practice which supports the foundation.

Let us look closely at these passages for, unless I am mistaken, they are
the only ones in On Certainty which lend weight to the interpretation
under consideration. It may be noticed that Wittgenstein, in the second,
modifies the image he uses: ‘one might almost say’. The modification is
necessary for, taken strictly, what Wittgenstein says is plainly false. Take
again the earth’s having existed for an immense stretch of time. It is evi-
dent that this serves as a foundation not in some special sense but in
the traditional one. Thus every proposition in geology presupposes that
the earth has existed for an immense stretch of time; but it does not,
in its turn, presuppose any particular proposition, such as that this rock
formation is 500 million years old. (It might be even older.) Or, again,
one can deny the latter proposition and leave geology untouched. But
if one denies the former, one undermines the whole practice.

In fact what Wittgenstein means in these passages soon becomes clear
once one takes them in their context. His point is that what is funda-
mental in our practice becomes evident only on reflection. As he says in
the first passage, we discover it subsequently, in the course of our practice.
In short, it is not independently inferred. His point, in other words, once
again, is that language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Wittgenstein belongs to the
tradition of classical realism. But, as we have seen, he has evident
connections with that tradition. The connections are most evident in
the Tractatus and in On Certainty. Indeed we may say that in his last work
he reclaimed, in a purified form, the realism he advanced in the first.

Notes

1. For an excellent development of this point see Hugh Knott ‘Before Language
2. It does not follow, incidentally, that there can be no such distinction at all.
Indeed those who deny any such distinction themselves treat it as absolute.
For example, Quine and his followers deny any such distinction because they
presume it would be absolute if there were.
The limit of language is shown by its being impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence, without simply repeating the sentence. (This has to do with the Kantian solution of the problem of philosophy.) (CV 10)

Starting with an interpretation of that cryptic remark from *Culture and Value*, this chapter is an effort to bring out the – profoundly transformed – Kantianism in Wittgenstein’s mature thought.

1. ‘The harmony between thought and reality’ (Z 55)

I think that what Wittgenstein had in mind by ‘the problem of philosophy’ must have concerned the nature of that correspondence between language, or thought, and reality that makes language language and thought thought. And I think the solution to the problem would have to be a broadly ‘Kantian’ one, in that the ‘correspondence’ in question would be transcendental rather than empirical – that is, not itself the sort of correspondence with reality that makes true thoughts true but rather the prior relationship to reality that makes true or false thoughts possible. Kant’s ‘transcendental logic’ has to do with this ‘possibility of truth and falsity’; it is comparable to what Wittgenstein called ‘the logic of language’ in the *Tractatus* and ‘grammar’ in the *Investigations*. Kant’s ‘transcendental dialectic’ has to do with the diagnosis and cure of the illusions a philosopher is likely to succumb to when contemplating transcendental logic; it is like the ‘conceptual therapy’ so prominent in Wittgenstein’s works:

Philosophical investigations: conceptual investigations. The essential thing about metaphysics: it obliterates the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations.

The fundamental thing [is] expressed grammatically … . (Z 458–9)
Wittgenstein would try to get metaphysicians to see the theories they propose (whether conservative or revisionary) as misleadingly expressed and misunderstood systems of grammar. He would try to persuade them that, ‘[l]ike everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language’ (Z 55).

A true proposition corresponds to the facts of the world; a false one does not. But since even a false proposition means something, it too must have some relation to reality. Shall we say that a false proposition corresponds to a logical fact – the logical possibility of its truth? No, for then we’ll have to ask whether the proposition asserting the logical possibility is itself true, that is, corresponds to the ‘logical fact’ in question – and so on ad infinitum. There is a relation between thought and the world deeper than that of a true thought’s correspondence with the fact it describes; but it clarifies nothing to picture that relation as a meta-correspondence existing between a proposition (true or false) and the meta-fact (the ‘logical possibility’) that makes it true.

Suppose I falsely think that my dean’s car is not really chartreuse in colour. The relation between my false thought and reality shows itself, not in some meta-fact, but in the everyday, humdrum fact that when we want to explain to someone what the word ‘chartreuse’ means in the sentence ‘Her car is not chartreuse,’ we point to something that really is chartreuse. A thought’s fundamental relatedness to reality is an internal relation: it is expressed in the grammar of the language used to express either it or its negation – and not in any further proposition.1

A proposition ‘contains its own sense’, its own possibility of truth – its own truth conditions. Adapting an example from PI 354, this means: if a proposition runs It’s raining then its verification is called ‘the fact that it’s raining’. Suppose I happen to be walking down a path with a stranger and it starts to rain. ‘Damn, it’s raining!’, I say, pointing to the drops pouring down from the clouds. If the stranger responds, ‘What do you mean?’, what else could I do but say it again, hopefully in a language she understands better than English?

2. ‘Justification comes to an end’ (OC 192)

It is not always possible to describe the fact that would verify a proposition without simply repeating it. When we’re engaged in philosophy, however, we’re apt to find this impossibility, this ‘limit,’ hard to acknowledge. We want to describe the fact without simply repeating it, or some ordinary-language equivalent. Why? Because we think we should be able to justify, not just to restate, those important things – so
that we can ‘meet the challenge of philosophical scepticism.’ As an illustration, consider the following dialogue on the philosophical ‘problem of induction’ (where \(W\) is Wittgenstein; \(U\) and \(V\), his interlocutors):

\(U\): Extrapolating from certain observations and experiments, Boyle inferred that gases – all gases – will expand when heated. Now, while I of course go along with this and similar inferences in practice, on reflection I can’t help wondering how what happened in the past can possibly be a ground for assuming something about future occurrences.

\(V\): Isn’t past experience of a certain sort precisely the kind of thing we call a good ground (reason, justification) for assuming that such-and-such will happen in the future?

\(U\): But it’s a good ground, surely, only if it really does make the prediction at least probable.

\(W\): It would be misleading to say that it’s a good ground because it makes the occurrence of the event probable. For that makes it sound like you’ve said something further about the ground, something justifying it as a ground; whereas in reality you’ve said nothing except that it comes up to a particular standard of good grounds – a standard that doesn’t itself have grounds.

\(U\): So in the end we can only adduce such grounds as we hold to be grounds?

\(V\): I’m not sure what you’re getting at. But I’m reminded of Kant’s misleading dictum that we can know things ‘only as they appear to us’. Read in one way, it’s an innocent truism: perhaps equivalent to the tautology, ‘We can’t know things in the absence of the conditions necessary for our knowing them’; perhaps suggestive of the more interesting grammatical remark, ‘Our modes of representation enter into our conception of what is real’. Read in another way it is a less-than-innocent expression of epistemological or metaphysical idealism: ‘We can only know how things appear to us (not as they are in reality),’ or ‘What we call “real” are only representations in us’.2

\(W\): Well said! Let me add what I believe to be at the bottom of the notion that in the end we can only adduce such grounds as we hold to be grounds: namely a misunderstanding of the nature of our language games. We misunderstand their nature when we think that they, and the criteria of relevant evidence implicit in them, ought to be grounded in reality in the way true propositions are grounded in the facts corresponding to them. This misunderstanding leads the reflective mind to wonder whether the
criteria themselves correspond to facts, and then to wonder by what criterion we are to make that judgment – and so on.\(^3\)

I assume our house won’t collapse during the next half hour. If you ask me to justify my assumption, I’ll assure you that it’s already stood for years – though not so long as to make it rickety. But if you ask me why that is a good reason, I’d be inclined to say: ‘That’s precisely the sort of thing we call a good reason in the language game of inductive inference!’

**U:** But is the language-game something we adopt arbitrarily?

**W:** The language-game is not really a kind of game – not something we choose to play or not to play, like golf or tennis. It’s at the centre of our lives from early childhood!

**U:** Why do we hold on to that primitive practice? Is that something arbitrary?

**W:** No more so than fear of fire, or the fear of a raging man coming at us!

**V:** Is there nothing more to be said?

**W:** When the chain of reasons gives out, we’re tempted to say, ‘It just is very probable that in this case things will behave as they always have’. But saying this masks the beginning of the chain. It introduces an idle wheel into the mechanism of our language: one that may appear functional, but in reality turns with nothing. It is the metaphysician in us that would introduce such an ‘idle wheel’ into the mechanism of our language of inductive reasoning.\(^4\)

**U:** Can’t we say at least this much: that without a certain objective regularity, inductive reasoning would be impossible?

**V:** I’m not sure. Mightn’t we dig in our heels and stick to our language game even in the face of a general irregularity in events?

**W:** Inferences might still be made in those circumstances. But whether people would call that inductive reasoning or not is another question.\(^5\)

### 3. Methods and results of measurement (PI 242)

Early and late, Wittgenstein’s philosophy bears a striking resemblance to Kant’s. In particular: the ‘formal concepts’ and ‘logic’ of the *Tractatus*, or ‘parts of speech’ and ‘grammar’ of the *Investigations* are analogous to Kant’s ‘transcendental forms of sensibility and understanding’. The most important difference emerges, I think, only with the introduction of language games and their grammars. With the introduction of these relatively stable ‘forms of life’, there is clearly no room left for anything like Kant’s absolutely stable ‘transcendental forms’.

‘Roughly speaking, the relation of the grammar of expressions to the facts which they are used to describe is that between the description of methods and units of measurement and the measures of objects measured by those methods and units’ (PO 448–9). I will be using that analogy in the remainder of this section to develop a Wittgensteinian version of Kant’s philosophy.

A metre is an instrument of measurement; instruments of measurement are supplied by the measuring subject rather than the measured object. We learn what a metre is by learning how to use a metre stick to measure lengths. The concept ‘one metre long’ is primarily a formal or grammatical, rather than an empirical, concept; the sentence ‘one metre = 100 centimetres’ has a grammatical, rather than descriptive use.

Grammar is to fact as method of measurement is to results of measurement. The family of activities called measuring length is part of the much larger family of measuring, and of the still larger family of comparing.6 In learning these various activities, we are introduced to different kinds of ‘objects’ (lengths, volumes, brightnesses, times, places, intensities, etc.) And ‘dimensions of reality’7 (physical, psychological, moral, etc.). Learning different language-games enables us to experience the various ‘objects’ proper to the different ‘dimensions of reality’. The possibility of these different forms of experience comes from the side of the subject, that is, the language-user. (Therefore it is what Kant would call ‘ideal’.) But whether, within any given dimension of reality, what is actually experienced at any given time is real rather than illusory: that comes from the side of the object – that is, from whatever happens to be true of what’s being talked about.

Let me note here: first, that in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, there is room for a greater variety of ‘objects’ and ‘dimensions of reality’ than in Kant’s; and second, that the subject–object, ideal–real dichotomies inherited from the Kantian tradition become decidedly less rigid and procrustean in Wittgenstein. I will expand on the first point in Section 5 and on the second point in Sections 6–7. Here I want to reformulate a famous set of Kantian distinctions in Wittgensteinian terms.

Kant described his philosophy as ‘transcendental idealism’, distinguishing it from the ‘empirical idealism’ of Berkeley, according to which the things we immediately perceive are realities that exist in our minds. Wittgenstein would say that Berkeley mischaracterized the grammar of the terms by which we designate things immediately perceived, terms such as ‘tree’ and ‘table’. Kant argued for what he called the ‘empirical reality’ of trees and tables. Wittgenstein would replace Kant’s argument against empirical idealism (his ‘Refutation of Idealism’) with certain
questions directed to the idealist, such as:

Do you want to deny, for example, that there may well have been metre-long fish in the sea long before the invention of the metric system?

If not, what are you getting at?

Now suppose that in response to the first question the idealist says, ‘Of course not!’, while in response to the second question, he reminds us that no system of measurement (or of description) is true or false, as are the measurements (or descriptions) made in terms of it. With that response, our empirical idealist has turned into what Kant would call a ‘transcendental idealist’.

A system of measurement is ‘transcendental’: it makes measurement possible. And it is ‘ideal’: functioning as a measure rather than as an object measured, it is applied to rather than read off or inferred from experience.

Kant opposed what he called ‘transcendental realism’ and sought to replace it with his own transcendental idealism. This is like Wittgenstein’s opposition to metaphysics in the name of ‘the autonomy of grammar’ – an important concept for the purposes of this chapter.

‘One metre = 100 centimetres’, ‘¬¬p’, ‘Orange is between red and yellow’, ‘There’s no colour between red and green’: four sentences we can easily imagine functioning grammatically, in teaching or reminding someone of a feature of our language. As grammatical rules, they are to be contrasted with empirical rules – such as the rule that warns pastry chefs to remove every speck of yolk from the white when making meringue:

‘Cookery’ is defined by its end, whereas ‘speaking’ is not. That is why the use of language is in a certain sense autonomous, as cooking and washing are not. You cook badly if you are guided in your cooking by rules other than the right ones; but ... if you follow grammatical rules other than such-and-such ones, that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else. (Z 320)

Grammatical rules exclude certain ‘moves’ and permit others, thereby defining a linguistic practice. They are more like the rules of a game than like empirical rules, that is, inductive generalizations. For while inductive generalizations (such as cooking rules) are (truly or falsely) descriptive, rules of grammar are not. They’re no more descriptive than are the rules of a game.

Of course, the grammar of language differs from rules of a game in the way it informs practices, such as describing and measuring, that permeate everyday life. So rules of grammar are in a sense not autonomous: they are held fast by the human life that surrounds them. For example, the ‘rule’
that orange is between red and yellow is held fast by the kind of employment colour words have in our lives. (To imagine a language without that bit of grammar would be to imagine a slightly different form of human life.) Now when Wittgenstein calls grammar ‘autonomous’, or even ‘arbitrary’, his purpose is to combat a certain philosophical temptation – an inclination to what Kant would call ‘transcendental realism’:

One is tempted to justify rules of grammar by sentences like ‘But there really are four primary colours’. And the saying that the rules of grammar are arbitrary is directed against the possibility of this justification, which is constructed on the model of justifying a sentence by pointing to what verifies it. (Z 331)

It makes sense to talk of justifying the proposition that the stomach is between the lungs and intestines by pointing to something in nature that makes it true. It makes no sense to talk of justifying the proposition that orange is between red and yellow by pointing to something in nature that makes it true.  

The point of saying that grammar is autonomous, or a grammatical rule arbitrary, is to combat one particular misunderstanding, namely that a convention can correspond or fail to correspond to the facts: ‘Pliny said that after the number 10 the numbers repeat themselves. He thought that they did this because of the way they are written down, the latter being determined by the numerical facts’ (AWL 65) – a wonderfully blatant case of ‘transcendental realism’, a particularly patent example of ‘a confusion that pervades all philosophy’:

The fallacy we want to avoid is this: when we reject some form of symbolism, we are inclined to look at it as though we had rejected a proposition as false. It is wrong to treat the rejection of a unit of measure as though it were the rejection of the proposition ‘The chair is three feet high rather than two’. This confusion pervades all of philosophy. (AWL 69)

4. The cause–effect schema (CE 375)

A very important instrument of everyday and technical thought, the concept of causality is a main focus of Kant’s transcendental analysis. Now it seems to me that the most important, and most Wittgensteinian, feature of Kant’s analysis is its rejection of any transcendental-realist account of the concept. In this section I will not be rehearsing Kant’s aetiology of that ‘transcendental illusion’ but instead proposing a parallel Wittgensteinian account.
Transcendental realism about causality arises from the ‘sublimation’ of the everyday concept of a causal connection:

I feel a pull on a string; I go along the string and detect the cause . . . . When I turn this wheel, then this wheel turns and the lever will strike the bell . . . . It is from this . . . that we have the idea of a ‘causal nexus’.

The idea that cause is not mere sequence but is a connexion. But the connection is a string or cogwheels. (CE 410)

Ordinary ‘nexuses’ (strings, cogwheels, connecting rods, links in a chain and the like) are disclosed by the sort of inquiry that Wittgenstein called ‘following a mechanism’. The transcendental realist sublimates these concrete, sensible links into an ethereal link perceptible only by an intuition of the mind (like the ‘substance’ underlying the sensible qualities of Descartes’ piece of wax). He might then christen this ethereal link ‘THE Nexus’.

The transcendental realist thinks our everyday distinction between causation and mere temporal coincidence requires that there always be a nexus between cause and effect. And he might go on to claim that one can establish the existence of such a nexus for oneself in certain cases by a kind of non-sensuous but intuitive knowledge. Thus, in a 1936 paper, Bertrand Russell claimed to be able to intuit ‘the because’: the nexus that linked the event of his seeing a cat and the event of his exclaiming, ‘A cat!’ The funny thing about that example is how far removed it is from the origin of the idea of ‘causal nexus’ in the process of following a mechanism. For there is no mechanism to follow here, no string, cogwheel, or connecting rod to discover. Of course, that doesn’t deter the metaphysician – because he imagines he can intuit a metaphysical link that bonds cause and effect far more firmly than could any gross, material connecting rod. For any material connecting rod can fail, while its metaphysical counterpart cannot. But why can’t it fail? The metaphysical illusion is to think we are perceiving a superlatively strong connection, whereas in reality we are acknowledging a grammatical rule (e.g., that ‘seeing a cat and exclaiming “cat”’ and ‘being pushed and falling over’ are precisely the sorts of things we designate ‘cause and effect’.)

Like Kant before him, Wittgenstein would certainly reject the project of some philosophers to reduce causation to mere sequence. He would regard the distinction between temporal sequence (‘constant conjunction’) and causal connection as ‘a grammatical truism’. What he would deny is that ‘metaphysical nexuses’ have any role in making or understanding that important, everyday distinction.
Also like Kant, Wittgenstein would reject any transcendental-realist justification of the principle of causality or other ‘principles of nature.’ But he would also reject Kant’s own ‘transcendental deduction’ of these principles. It is to this watershed difference between the two great philosophers that we now turn.

5. Is philosophy ethnology? (CV 37)

‘Hertz said that wherever something did not obey his laws there must be invisible masses to account for it. … If we say we are not going to account for the changes, then we would have a system in which there are no causes’ (AWL 16). Now the transcendental realist wants to say that there would have to be something wrong, something false, with any such system, and that only a system with causes would correspond to reality. I take it that, in Wittgenstein’s view, our transcendental realist would be speaking of ‘right or wrong,’ ‘true or false’ in a context in which this has no clear meaning. Thus, when Hertz said that there must be a cause to account for the deviations from his law, ‘[t]his statement is not right or wrong, but may be practical or impractical’ (ibid.).

Transcendental realists (‘Realists’, for short) would claim that when we say things like ‘The cause is proportional to the effect’, we are describing a very general feature of Reality – whereas we are actually … dealing with a norm of expression that we ourselves have fixed … . Whether all velocities can be accounted for by the assumption of invisible masses is a question of mathematics, or grammar, and is not settled by experience. It is settled beforehand. It is a question of the adopted norm of explanation. In a system of mechanics, for example, there is a system of causes, although there may be no causes in another system. (AWL 16)

A causal principle presents an ideal. But ‘[t]he ideal doesn’t lose any of its dignity if it’s presented as the principle determining the form of one’s reflections. A sound measure’ (CV 27). A causal principle does, however, present a potentially insidious ideal:

The insidious thing about the causal point of view is that it leads us to say: ‘Of course, it had to happen like that’. Whereas we ought to think: it may have happened like that – and also in many other ways. (CV 37)
For example: A medley of dream recollections may make such a strong impression on us that we ask why just these recollections occurred then:

Who can say? – It may be connected with our present life, and so too with our wishes, fears, etc. – ‘But do you want to say that this phenomenon can only exist in these particular causal surroundings?’ – I want to say it does not necessarily have to make sense to speak of discovering its cause. (CV 83)

While in his ‘Copernican revolution’ Kant abandoned a Realist justification of causal principles, he continued to cling to a rigidly rationalist conception of their nature and scope. Wittgenstein completes Kant’s revolution through his introduction of ‘the ethnological point of view’ into conceptual investigation – that is, through his method of imagining historical developments for our concepts different from what actually occurred. We thereby see our conceptual problems from a completely different angle than we are used to:

[D]oes that mean we are saying that philosophy is ethnology? No, it only means that we are taking up a position right outside [weit draussen] so as to be able to see things more objectively.

What I am opposed to is the concept of some ideal exactitude given us a priori, as it were. At different times we have different ideals of exactitude; and none of them is supreme. (CV 37)

I take it that Wittgenstein would be equally opposed to any such dogmatic norm of explanation or principle of causality. For ‘[t]he philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher’ (Z 455).

6. ‘In the beginning was the deed’ (OC 402)

It is clear in both Kant and Wittgenstein that our most important and elementary categories of thought are neither intuited nor reasoned to. What Wittgenstein adds to this is a down-to-earth account of the formation of these concepts, one that reveals their essential (logical, conceptual) connection with the sort of pre-ratiocinative interaction with the world that begins in early childhood. This ‘addition’ is actually a profound transformation of Kantianism.15

We teach children these categories in the course of teaching them the use of words – an instruction that makes sense to them only when they are already engaged with their environment. So, for example, they are ready to begin learning the language of cause and effect only when we
can draw their attention to circumstances in which they can already anticipate an occurrence.\textsuperscript{16}

‘The origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop’ (CE 395). Language – for instance the language of cause and effect – is an outgrowth of ‘primitive reactions’. A child touches a flame and needs no language to anticipate what will happen if he touches another one. But soon he will learn how to apply the words ‘cause and effect’ to the touching a flame/feeling a pain sequence – and then to an open set of other sequences we count as analogous. On that foundation, he may eventually be taught techniques of controlled experiment: for, as Hume remarked, ‘the circumstance on which the effect depends is frequently involved in other circumstances which are foreign and extrinsic. [And] the separation of it often requires great attention, accuracy, and subtlety’.\textsuperscript{17}

Language – I want to say – is a refinement. ‘In the beginning was the deed.’

… it is characteristic of our language that the foundation on which it grows consists in steady ways of living, regular ways of acting.

Its function is determined \textit{above all} by action, which it accompanies. (CE 395, 397\textsuperscript{18})

Our language, including our forms of reasoning, develops and expands through our interactions with the world. And conversely, the world-as-we-experience-it gets larger as we master more language. For example, learning methods of calculation enables us to uncover new facts:

\textit{Objection}: How can \textit{calculation} uncover new facts? It seems to me that only experiment could do that.

\textit{Reply}: What facts? Do you think you can show what facts are meant by pointing to them with your finger? Doesn’t it take mathematics to define the character of what you’re calling ‘a fact’? (Suppose you want to know how many vibrations a note has. It took arithmetic to teach you to ask that kind of question and to see that kind of fact.)\textsuperscript{19}

It’s a matter of the logic of language that chairs (for instance) are physical, moveable objects that can be caused to move by pushing them. It’s a matter of fact that chairs exist and that people often move them around. This illustrates a distinction important to both Kant and Wittgenstein – a distinction that, unlike Kant, Wittgenstein did come to qualify. The qualification is that the distinction between the logic of language and the facts of the world is not everywhere sharp. Thus, in normal circumstances, we’d
have difficulty in stating what would count as doubting matters of fact such as the existence of one’s own two hands or the fact that one is pushing a chair with them. Our not normally having such doubts has a logical force. For to express uncertainty in such cases would throw into question our understanding of what we claim to be unsure of. That in normal circumstances no one doubts such things characterizes a linguistic practice and is therefore part of logic, broadly conceived. Here doubt – hesitancy – would undermine the language game by ‘annihilating its yardsticks’. (Imagine someone ‘supposing that all our perceptions are unreliable’. What could this mean but: ‘We rely on our senses; she doesn’t? This certainly wouldn’t be a case of mistaken judgement! For she appears to have lost her mind – her logical faculty, her very power of judgement.)

The lack of a sharp, absolute dividing line between (as Kant would put it) the matter and the form of our knowledge is a point receiving special emphasis in *On Certainty*, and made vivid through its image of our life with language as a river:

> And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited. (99)

> I distinguish between the movement of waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (97) (Although the Grand Canyon channels the waters of the Colorado, the waters continue to do some channelling of their own.)

At this point we can imagine the Kantian philosopher expressing the same worry Wittgenstein himself once felt: ‘But what becomes of logic now? Its rigor seems to be giving way here. – But in that case doesn’t logic altogether disappear?’ (PI 108). The response of the *Investigations* can be conveyed, roughly, with the help of the following analogies: that a channel subjected to an unaccustomed rush of water may become part of the flow it used to contain does not imply that a real channel would have to be made of super-hard material; that a steel rod used today to measure things may tomorrow be measured against something still harder does not imply that ordinary measuring rods merely approximate to some transcendental measuring rod ‘than which none harder can be conceived’.

Although the contrast between descriptive propositions and rules of description shades off in all directions, this is not to say that the contrast is not of the greatest importance (cf. RFM, p. 363). From this we can see that Wittgenstein would be no happier with Quine, who denies
the importance of the contrast, than with Kant, who fails to acknowledge its ‘shading off in all directions’.

7. ‘By favour of nature’ (OC 505)

According to transcendental realism, language (or its logical structure) emerged (or could be reconstructed as emerging) from some sort of ‘perception of the structure of reality’. According to Wittgenstein, ‘it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game’ (OC 204):

[T]he phenomenon of language is based on regularity, on agreement in action ... .

I can, e.g., be quite sure that the colour of this object will be called ‘green’ by far the most of the human beings who see it. (RFM p. 342)

If we teach a human being such-and-such a technique by means of examples, – that he then proceeds like this and not like that in a particular new case, or that in this case he gets stuck, and that this and not that is the ‘natural’ continuation for him: this of itself is an extremely important fact of nature. (Z 355)

For instance: you say to someone ‘This is red’ (pointing); then you tell him ‘Fetch me a red book’ – and he will behave in a particular way. (LFM 182)

A transcendental realist might say that people agree in their judgments about what things are red ‘because they perceive the same universal, that is, see what all red things have in common that make them red’. Wittgenstein’s contrasting position would be that such an immensely important – and fortunate – ‘agreement in reaction’ belongs to the deepest foundations of our language. Where the transcendental realist would trace the agreement to the mind’s perception of the nature of things, Wittgenstein would call it a ‘favour of nature’ (OC 505). For it is thanks to nature – and not solely or primarily to any perception (or inference or volition) on our part – that we employ the concepts that we do.

What about the Kantian ‘transcendental idealist’? I take it he would trace the concept-forming agreements we have been talking about to ‘universal and necessary features of the perceiving subject’. Now if Wittgenstein would reject this ‘subjective’ explanation of concept-formation just as much as the transcendental realist’s ‘objective’ account (as surely he would), then how would he describe the relationship between our concepts and the nature of things? – I believe that difficult question is best addressed in the form of a dialogue focusing on particular cases. In the following effort, W represents Wittgenstein’s mature position, V a kind
of Kantian position (one stressing the subject’s power to ‘legislate for nature’), and $U$ a ‘transcendental realist’ point of view. ($U$ is a stout defender of the ‘real and natural’, which he contrasts sharply with the ‘ideal and conventional’.)

$V$: Take our system of colour concepts, for example: Does it reside in our nature or in the nature of things?

$W$: How are we to put it? – Not in the nature of colour. For the nature of colour is what our use of ‘colour words’, our ‘colour grammar’, shows it to be.

$V$: Then there is something arbitrary about this system, this ‘grammar’?

$W$: It is akin both to what is arbitrary and to what is non-arbitrary.

$U$: Isn’t it clear that we acknowledge a colour intermediate between red and yellow (orange), but not a colour intermediate between red and green?

$V$ & $W$: Yes. Certainly.

$U$: The reason we acknowledge no such colour as reddish green is that no such colour exists – any more than a square circle. ‘Reddish green’ and ‘square circle’ both represent logically incompatible combinations of elements. So it’s certainly not arbitrary that we exclude them from language.

$W$: ‘Reddish green’ is no more a term in our language than ‘square circle.’ So I’m unclear what it is that you want to say does not, or cannot exist.

$U$: You two want to say that there’s no such colour because we have no such colour term, whereas I want to say the converse: that we have no such colour term because there’s no such colour. You attend to language, to convention. I ask: doesn’t nature have something to say?

$W$: She does indeed – but not by ruling out the existence of something (‘reddish green’). Nature speaks by confronting us with certain facts – such as the fact of our inability to recognize straight off a colour made by mixing red and green paints as a colour that could be made in that way.24

$V$: Are you engaged in framing hypotheses about the formation of concepts? Are you moving toward a reduction of philosophy to a kind of empirical science, a branch of ethnology?

$W$: No. I am not saying: if such-and-such facts were different, then people would have different concepts. I am saying: if
anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones and certain others absolutely wrong, then let her imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we’re used to. For then the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to her. *Intelligible*, not inevitable or causally necessitated.  

Compare a concept with a style of painting – the ancient Egyptian, for instance. If a contemporary painter believes that style to be absolutely the wrong one, let her place herself imaginatively in the very different historical-cultural world of the ancient Egyptians; for then she’ll understand how such a style could be – not arbitrary, nor yet inevitable – but natural and compelling.

**U:** In our language we speak of colours such as reddish-blue and bluish-green. Imagine people who couldn’t be taught such concepts. Wouldn’t their colour language be incomplete?

**W:** We don’t have to think of their language and form of life as an incomplete or otherwise defective version of ours. What I once said about the feeble-minded applies here too: that while one tends to imagine them under the aspect of disorder, it would be far more fruitful to imagine them under the aspect of a simpler, more primitive order.

*Here V drops out of the discussion and U becomes the spokesman for a specifically Cartesian form of transcendental realism.*

**U:** Let’s move from colour concepts to personal pronouns. Wouldn’t a language without personal pronouns be incomplete? Descartes would certainly object to a language with no first-person singular!

**W:** Our use of the word *I* is suggested by certain invariable experiences; if we imagine these experiences changed, the ordinary use of the word breaks up. But it would be a confusion to think that we would then be describing phenomena incompletely – as though we would thus omit pointing to something, the personality, which the *I* in our present language points to.

**U:** Descartes thought the word *I* points to something fundamental – to an ‘Archimedean point.’

**W:** The pronoun *I* is one symbol among others having a practical use: it could be discarded when not necessary for practical speech. It does not stand out among other words unless we begin using it as Descartes did. My work has been to counteract the tendency in philosophy to put a halo around *I* – or around any other word of our language.
U: You’re sounding like a Zen Buddhist!

W: If Zen Buddhists oppose the urge to place a metaphysical emphasis on our language or any of its concepts, then we have something in common – though what motivates me, as a philosopher, in that opposition may not be the same as what motivates them.

U: ‘... one symbol among others having a practical use’? How different that sounds from what you used to say about ‘the deeply mysterious I’ and ‘the truth of solipsism’.

W: Compare: ‘the feeling of the unreality of one’s surroundings’. Many people have that (solipsistic) feeling before the onset of mental illness. I once had it. And I contrast it with another experience, which I have also had – one I called ‘the mystical feeling’ and described in the words: ‘wondering at the existence of the world’ or ‘seeing the world as a miracle’. – Now in all these cases words are being taken out of the stream of their ordinary, practical use, and used in what I want to call ‘a secondary sense’, to express an experience. Nothing I have been saying here argues against that.

If my philosophical work has any value, it consists in two things: the first in having uncovered the conceptual confusions at the root of the theories of Descartes and other philosophers; the second in showing how little is achieved when these confusions are uncovered. So, for example, dissolving what philosophers call ‘the problem of the existence of the external world’ leaves completely untouched the possibility – and possibly profound personal significance – of the ‘solipsistic’ and ‘mystical’ experiences I alluded to.

(The final paragraph is a paraphrase of lines from the preface to the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. It expresses what I want to call Wittgenstein’s transformation of Kant’s famous ‘I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith’.)

8. ‘To bring words back ...’ (PI 116)

One of Wittgenstein’s most important messages is that if we are to succeed as philosophers in our job of elucidating the connection between language and reality, we’ll have to take a much closer look at the applications of our words than we’ve been inclined to take:

When philosophers use a word ... and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game [Sprache] which is its original home? (PI 116)
But what in the world do the words of our language signify? ‘What is supposed to show what they signify, if not the kind of use they have?’ (PI 10).

‘What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’ (PI 116) – as contrasted, for instance, with what empirical idealists do with words. Empirical idealists – notably the followers of Berkeley – think they are clarifying the everyday use of physical-object words, such as ‘chair’ and ‘tree’, when actually they are imposing a metaphysical use; they...

… imagine a game in which ‘Such and such a body is there’ is a shorthand for ‘I have had such and such impressions’. But to take this as the general rule is to simplify our language [...]. Not just a simplification, a falsification ... (CE 421)

It is the philosopher’s failure to acknowledge metaphysical uses as caricatures of everyday uses that conjures up metaphysical puzzles, such as: whether, strictly speaking, one can ever know what another person feels, or what caused an event, or whether there’s anything at all beyond ‘the I and its data’.

Sensing that the ‘realist’ style of much everyday talk tends to alienate us from the things we immediately perceive, Philonous in Berkeley’s Dialogues attacks the normal form of expression as if he were attacking a dubious description, whereupon his foil, Hylas rushes to the defence of the normal form of expression as if he were defending a truth recognized by every reasonable person. Kant would call both of them, Philonous as well as Hylas, ‘transcendental realists’.

Sharply distinguishing the form from the matter (or content) of our cognition, Kant explains that ‘transcendental’ refers to those forms (categories of the understanding, etc.) that condition the possibility of cognition. Transcendental realists want to say that the system of categories which enables us to describe objects and make truth-claims is itself true – that is, that our thoughts and statements correspond to reality not only materially, in what they say (in their content), but also formally, in how they say it (in their logic or grammar). While Philonous argues that the empirical realist style of everyday (‘vulgar’) speech does not correspond to ‘the form of reality’, Hylas argues (in effect) that it does.

‘There are trees in the garden’: Hylas and Philonous disagree not over whether this is true but over ‘what it really means’. Both think it stands in need of a ‘philosophical analysis’ – an explanation of the sense in which it is (or may be) true. Wittgenstein’s ‘Kantian’ approach is to reject the demand for such an analysis on the grounds that the sense of
the proposition is in the proposition itself, not in some other – perhaps ‘truer’ form of – proposition.

‘In the proposition itself’? But where is the proposition? – Not in some inner sanctum, cut off from the stream of life, such as a Kant’s ‘transcendental understanding’. Nor does its logic, its possibility of truth or falsity, issue from a Kantian ‘spontaneity of the understanding’. For logic is inseparable from those ‘outer’ normative contexts of use that Wittgenstein calls language games: ‘You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it’ (OC 501).31

Notes

1. Compare PI 428–9 (which present, I think, a demystified version of the Tractarian doctrine that the logical form common to language and reality can be shown but not said). Cf. also the following from BB 167: ‘understanding a sentence, we say, points to a reality outside the sentence. Whereas one might say: “Understanding a sentence means getting hold of its content; and the content of the sentence is in the sentence”.’


3. The preceding dialogue is based largely on PI 472–85 and OC 599; the remainder on PG 110–1. Cf. CV 16 (‘Nothing we do can be defended absolutely and finally’) and OC 378 (‘Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment’).

4. Compare the following lines from the unpublished notes of Margaret Macdonald on Wittgenstein’s 1935–36 lectures ‘On “Personal Experience”,’ edited by Cora Diamond: ‘Sometimes, when asked “How do you know?” we give a rule. Then, if asked “But how do you know the rule,” we may refuse to reply at all, or may give a causal explanation. But when you stop giving reasons, the temptation is to say “Then all you mean is that you say so-and-so”’. (But this is not in fact the way in which we use “I merely said so-and-so.”) To get over this you are then inclined to add idle wheels to your mechanism. Idle wheels can be turned one way or another without making any difference to the mechanism. … For, as our private box example showed (cf. PI 293), you can say whatever you please and it makes no difference; there is no possibility of check. (Have you therefore said anything at all?)’ (Typescript).

5. Cf. RFM, p. 80: ‘Then according to you …’; and p. 51: ‘Imagine you have a row of marbles …’.

6. Cf. RFM, p. 433: ‘Concept is something like a picture with which one compares objects’.

7. I borrowed this phrase from Dilman (2002), 5.


9. Why not say that this ‘grammar’ corresponds to the fact that mixing red and yellow paints yields orange paint? – What if there’s a chemical reaction and we get black paint?

10. A chemical/alchemical term used in PI 38, 89 and 94. Cf. PI 36 (‘Where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a Wittgenstein’s ‘Kantian Solution’ 139
spirit'); PO 59, on the metaphysical notion of a proposition as a ‘shadow’ intermediate between the sentence we use and the fact that would verify it; and BB 36, on a shadow as ‘a picture the intention of which cannot be questioned’.


12. Cf. CE 401: ‘But if we reflect that the machine could have behaved differently ...’; and RFM, pp. 83–8, on ‘the logical machine’ and ‘the hardness of the logical must’.

13. Compare ‘metaphysical nexuses’ with (1) the ‘volitions’ or ‘acts of will’ investigated in PI 611–33, and (2) the ‘beetle’ of PI 293.

14. Compare LFM 150: ‘[M]athematics is not arbitrary, only in this sense, that it has an obvious application. Whereas chess hasn’t got an obvious application in that way. That’s why it is a game.’ The metaphysical illusion, as Wittgenstein goes on to explain, would consist in thinking that the non-arbitrariness of a mathematical system rests on correspondence with ‘a mathematical realm’.

15. It would be worthwhile, but beyond the scope of this paper, to compare and contrast Wittgenstein’s transformation of Kantianism with that of philosophers in the Continental tradition, such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Martin Heidegger.

16. I am indebted to H.O. Mounce for this example (and will add, for what it’s worth, that border collies can be trained to herd sheep only when they can be induced to take an interest in them). I am even more indebted to Mounce for provoking the composition of this paper, which is something of a rejoinder to what he wrote for this volume.


18. Compare OC 402 and 475.

19. This is a close paraphrase of something on p. 381 of RFM. (I think the above ‘Reply’ illustrates the realism without empiricism mentioned on p. 325 of RFM. That realism is certainly not a kind of transcendental, metaphysical realism – a point well-argued by Cora Diamond (1991).)

20. See OC 56 and 492. Cf. RFM, p. 329 (‘The certainty with which I call the colour “red” is the rigidity of my measuring rod’) and OC 515 (‘If my name is not L.W., how can I rely on what is meant by “true” and “false”?’)

21. ‘If in life we are surrounded by death, so too in the health of our intellect we are surrounded by madness’ (CV 44): here too we have a very important but non-entirely-sharp distinction. Cf. RFM, p. 80 (‘And I say further that the line between what we include in “thinking” is no more a hard and fast one ...’); OC 318–21; and RPP II 192.


23. Compare LPP 258: ‘But someone might be trained to call olive “reddish green.” So you might say “It’s only how we look at it” or “The colour wheel might just as well be divided differently.” I want to show that’s not so.’ (My emphasis.) For another example, consider ‘the asymmetrical grammar of psychological concepts’, a persistent topic in Wittgenstein’s later writings. Is it just arbitrary? Wittgenstein’s answer is No: certain facts about psychological phenomena make that asymmetry ‘intelligible’ (PI, p. 230) – for example, the fact that we don’t often guess one another’s thoughts. (Of course transcendental realists will want to go beyond a humdrum fact like that to something like: ‘We don’t often guess one another’s thoughts because thoughts are private’.)
24. ‘The insidious thing about the causal point of view is that it leads us to say: Of course it had to happen like that’. Whereas we ought to think: ‘it may have happened like that – and also in many other ways’ (CV 37). Frank Cioffi presented a nice example of this in a lecture on Freud’s book on Leonardo. Cioffi argued that Freud’s relentlessly causal point of view blinded him to that fact that psychoanalysis provides (at best) only one of many ways of understanding Leonardo’s paintings.

25. For this elucidation, and the previous one relating to ‘the Egyptian style’, I am indebted to a letter from Ilham Dilman. (Here the relevant Wittgenstein text is Z 372.)

26. Up to here, this dialogue is based on: Z 357–67, 372; PI 500, p. 230; and AWL 62–3. Most of the lines are more or less close paraphrases of Wittgenstein. Compare BB 57 (‘Devonshire’) and PI 400–3 (‘the visual room’).

27. What I say here and in the remainder of this dialogue is derived largely (with some interpretation) from NB 80, TLP 6.44, 6.52 and the preface, and RPP I 125. Compare ‘A Lecture on Ethics’, in PO 37–44.

28. Wittgenstein doesn’t actually make this contrast – though I think it’s plausible to ascribe it to him.

29. Compare PI 24; RFM, p. 86 (‘Imagine someone …’), and the following from the Margaret Macdonald notes, referred to earlier: ‘In contemplating [one’s foot, e.g.] in the idealist way, we forget the way we do use the word “foot”‘; if we concentrate on the idea of the appearance of the foot, we think the word “foot” must be used in the same way as “appearance of a foot”… [and we are tempted to] go so far as to say we should replace “foot” by “appearance of foot.” You can’t get rid of this temptation by kicking the stone as Dr. Johnson did. It is no better either to say that what exists is the foot; that means just as little [as saying, “What exists is the appearance of a foot”]. I have never experienced the temptation to realism. I have never said “What exists is the foot”, but I have been strongly tempted to idealism’ (typescript, my emphasis). Much of On Certainty can be read as a dialogue between Wittgenstein and a philosopher who was strongly tempted in the opposite direction – G.E. Moore.

30. Loosely based on PI 402. Through his mouthpiece Philonous, Berkeley was trying to persuade us to replace the concept of a material object with that of ‘ideas in the mind’. But, as Robert Arrington has pointed out (2001, 171), that’s not likely how Berkeley himself conceived of what he was doing. For he seems to have thought he was telling us something about the esse of the world and thereby making a supremely general factual claim. That’s why Kant called him a transcendental realist. (‘From the very outset “Realism”, “Idealism”, etc., are names which belong to metaphysics. That is, they indicate that their adherents believe they can say something specific about the essence of the world’ (PR 86).)

31. For their invaluable criticism, suggestions and encouragement, I want to thank Mary Brenner, Curtis Brooks, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, and the late Ilham Dilman.
It is sometimes supposed that Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* provides a solution to – or better, a dissolution of – the traditional problem of philosophical scepticism. I will argue here that this is at best a misleading way of seeing things. Wittgenstein has important and interesting things to say about scepticism, but they do not by themselves justify a straightforward dismissal of scepticism in its more philosophically challenging forms. I shall also argue that his anti-sceptical argument depends on a commitment to an essentially Kantian transcendentalism which Wittgenstein is unwilling to do more than hint at, but which needs to be more fully articulated before we can come to a conclusion about the success of his case against scepticism. I shall suggest finally that a detailed articulation of the kind of position which Wittgenstein presupposes can be found in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

1. Global scepticism

I want to begin by distinguishing ‘local’ and ‘global’ scepticism. The former is a doubt about particular, everyday beliefs – the book is on the table, the cat is on the chair. The latter is a doubt about philosophical beliefs – for instance, that there are (or are not) mind-independent physical objects. G.E. Moore, whose anti-sceptical writings were at least in part the stimulus for the writing of the notes which were published as *On Certainty*, does not make this distinction. However, the Sceptic against whom Moore’s criticisms are aimed initially appears to be a proponent of local scepticism, someone who claims to doubt all sorts of everyday claims which are apparently quite simple and obvious. In response, Moore insists that there are a great many propositions ‘every one of which (in my own opinion) I know, with certainty, to be true’ (1925, 36).
These propositions he describes as ‘obvious truisms’ (ibid.): some of them are matters of common knowledge, some of them descriptions of states of affairs that were transparently obvious to Moore in the situation in which he uttered the propositions. ‘I am at present, as you can all see, in a room and not in the open air; I am standing up and not either sitting or lying down; I have clothes on and am not absolutely naked …’ (1941, 227). Some of these truisms concern the reality of material objects; that Moore knows them with certainty to be true constitutes in his opinion, a ‘perfectly rigorous’ proof of the existence of an external world (1939, 146). And so, it seems that Moore takes his recital of homely truisms to answer not only the local sceptic who directly doubts the truisms themselves, but also the global sceptic who doubts, not just whether there is a book on the table, but whether there is an external world at all.

Wittgenstein, according to what seems to be the standard reading of On Certainty, responds to the debate between Moore and the (local) Sceptic by claiming that both are abusing language. The sorts of truisms that the Sceptic claims to doubt and Moore claims to know cannot normally be doubted; but for that very reason they cannot be said to be known either. They function rather as assumptions which establish the framework for our thinking (OC 208, 209, 243). When we claim to ‘know’ something, we do so in contexts where there is a point to the claim, that is, in a situation where it might make sense to doubt it (OC 468). But the truisms Moore considers are what we simply take for granted before even starting to consider whether we know or doubt things. Doubting some things presupposes not doubting – not even considering as possibly up for doubt – other things (OC 74, 519, 613). As Marie McGinn puts it, ‘[t]he sceptic’s doubts are misplaced for precisely the same reason that Moore’s knowledge claims are: his doubts misrepresent our relation to propositions that are, in the context, technique-constituting propositions, and treats it as an epistemic relation to empirical judgments’ (1989, 159).

A different criticism of Moore, however, has focused on his assumption that the global sceptic (or the idealist, his other target) can be refuted by pointing to our knowledge of specific empirical facts. Against this it has been argued, quite rightly, I think, that the post-Cartesian global sceptic is not concerned with specific empirical claims, but with the metaphysical question as to whether her experiences give her access to a mind-independent reality.1 She may be quite happy to agree that Moore has two hands, or that he is showing her his hand, and not his foot. She might even be content to agree that he knows he has two hands, taking ‘knows’ in a modest, everyday contextualist sense. What she would reject, though, is the idea that Moore could then infer from
this to a claim about the existence of the ‘external world’ in a philosophically controversial sense. There is an empirical level, on which we can pretty much agree about trees and cats and hands, but there is also a metaphysical level at which we try to analyse or give a deeper explanation for such homely empirical truths. Interestingly enough, Moore himself stated that, although he was quite sure of the truth of his ‘common sense’ propositions, he was ‘very sceptical as to what, in certain respects, the correct analysis of such propositions is’ (1925, 53). But the idealist doesn’t deny the existence of hands, trees, etc.; she just analyses propositions about them differently from the realist, while the global sceptic is someone who suspends judgement about which, if any, of the proposed analyses is the correct one. Moore’s simple assertion that he knows he has hands makes no contribution to this debate.

If this is correct though, if Moore’s recital of truisms doesn’t address the concerns of the global sceptic, then can Wittgenstein’s discussion of those truisms have any more relevance to them? It is true that in On Certainty Wittgenstein has little explicitly to say about the debates between realists, idealists and (global) sceptics; however, the little that he does say is interesting, and brings into the discussion some of the central themes of his later philosophy. He recognizes the distinction of levels which I noted above: ‘ “Doubting the existence of the external world” does not mean for example doubting the existence of a planet, which later observations proved to exist’ (OC 20). The idealist does not doubt that people have hands: ‘rather he will say that he was not dealing with the practical doubt which is being dismissed, but there is a further doubt behind that one. – That this is an illusion has to be shewn in a different way’ (OC 19). Wittgenstein thus recognizes that Moore’s strategy fails, for the reasons given above (thinking that metaphysical disputes can be settled on the empirical level); nevertheless he wants to show that the idealist’s metaphysical doubts are illusory. Wittgenstein’s way of putting things seems less than helpful; the idealist would not say she was doubting anything at any level, but was rather, concerned to give an explanation for our ordinary talk of physical objects. In this she is competing with the rival explanations offered by the realist. Wittgenstein however suggests that neither explanation is needed, nor is even intelligible.

‘[A] doubt about existence only works in a language game’ (OC 24), and so too does an assertion of existence. If we try to formulate what the realists and idealists disagree about by stating a thesis like ‘There are physical objects’, this, Wittgenstein informs us, will simply be ‘nonsense’ (OC 35, 37). He goes on to note that the concept of a ‘physical object’ is not in itself meaningless; that is to say, it does have a use, even
though a rather uncommon one. That use is to make ‘grammatical’ statements.

‘A is a physical object’ is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn’t yet understand either what ‘A’ means, or what ‘physical object’ means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and ‘physical object’ is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity, …) And that is why no such proposition as: ‘There are physical objects’ can be formulated. (OC 36)

Our concepts of the physical and of objects are used to make certain distinctions that are basic to our understanding of the world. Not that we start off by learning the concept of a physical object, and then learn what things to assign to that category; rather, that concept is a way of marking essential distinctions which we initially pick up, without thinking about it, from particular examples, ‘Physical objects’ are such things as chairs, tables, houses and trees; surprise, desire, the number 7, courage, the Baroque, Oxford University are not. This copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* is a physical object; but if someone says ‘*The Brothers Karamazov* is the greatest of Dostoevsky’s novels’, she is not talking about a physical object. But in this sense, no one would dispute that there are physical objects. (And equally, no one would dispute that there are other realities which are not physical objects; after all, there is no point in having a concept if one cannot use it to make distinctions and contrasts.) ‘There are physical objects’ is not a factual proposition, but a (somewhat misleading) attempt to articulate a basic ‘grammatical’ feature of our language and our thinking. Wittgenstein thinks it is nonsense, because putting it like that makes it look as if it were a sort of empirical claim, which might perhaps turn out to be wrong. But if it is taken in the ‘grammatical’ sense, it simply isn’t up for falsification. (Or verification.) What it means for there to be physical objects is, after all, shown in all the everyday things that we say about cabbages and cars, mountains and machines.

So it seems that Wittgenstein does, after all, have an answer to global scepticism. If we interpret the claim about physical objects as a grammatical platitude, then there is no dispute over it. Of course, the realists and the idealists do want to take the claim in a more substantive sense. The latter want to say that the undeniably existent physical objects in the ordinary sense are not physical objects in some deep metaphysical sense, while the former insist that they are. For Wittgenstein, this dispute will be empty, unless it has some practical consequences. This is not just a philistine rejection of abstract thought for lacking practical application. Wittgenstein’s point is that if the belief – or disbelief – in
physical objects in the metaphysical sense makes no difference at all to our lives, then it cannot be said to have any clear meaning. Given Wittgenstein’s association of meaning with use, if we have no use for the allegedly ‘deeper’ concept of a physical object, then that concept is without meaning. If there is no way in which we can manifest our grasp of the ‘deeper’ concept in any practice, then there will be no sense in which we can attribute an understanding of the concept to anybody – including ourselves. For a realist or idealist to show that their dispute is not an empty one, it would be necessary for them to show that the existence or non-existence of the (metaphysically real) external world would make a real difference within our experience. That there is no such difference in practice between a realist and an idealist is strongly suggested by Wittgenstein in the following passage from *Zettel*:

> One man is a convinced realist, another a convinced idealist, and teaches his children accordingly. In such an important matter as the existence or non-existence of the external world they don’t want to teach their children anything wrong.

> What will the children be taught? To include in what they say: ‘There are physical objects’ or the opposite?

> If someone does not believe in fairies, he does not need to teach his children ‘There are no fairies’: he can omit to teach them the word ‘fairy’. On what occasions are they to say ‘There are …’ or ‘There are no …’? Only when they meet people of the contrary belief.

> But the idealist will teach his children the word ‘chair’, after all, for of course he wants to teach them to do this and that, e.g., to fetch a chair. Then where will be the difference between what the idealist-educated children say and the realist ones? Won’t the difference only be one of battle-cry? (Z 413–14)

Wittgenstein is a little tentative here. But the clear moral of the discussion is that if a philosophical difference does not show itself in any way in practice, there is no real point at issue at all. Realists, idealists and sceptics don’t dispute about particular empirical facts; their dispute concerns the ultimate ontological analysis of those facts. What Wittgenstein seems to be doing here is making a further move (we can call it ‘anti-realist’) by denying the intelligibility of that dispute. This means that the sceptic and the idealist have bought their immunity from Moore-style refutations only by locating their doubts and assertions at a level where they lose all relevance to human life, and thus, for Wittgenstein, all meaning. Realists and idealists are able to converse easily enough about their common world; they mean the same thing when
they say ‘chair’ – which is to say, for Wittgenstein that they use the word in the same way in the same circumstances. In all this, the realist and the idealist agree with one another, and with those who have never bothered themselves with the philosophical issues in the first place. Where they differ from the latter is that they suggest conflicting philosophical explanations of our ordinary experience. But, as Wittgenstein seems strongly to suggest here, these are vacuous.

However, it is worth noting that Wittgenstein’s position may not be quite as straightforwardly anti-sceptical as it has often been presented. Although, as Avrum Stroll notes, ‘scepticism is parasitic upon a conceptual model developed by its dogmatic opponents’, we do not have to accept that ‘the sceptic is buying into the model and is committed to some of its basic implications’ (1994, 90–1). The (global) sceptic argues that the debate between metaphysical theorists such as realists and idealists is undecidable, and that we should therefore content ourselves with the ordinary, practical understanding of things which the rival theorists were trying to analyse or explain in their different ways. The sceptic can, with a little charity, be seen as starting with the metaphysicians’ own assumptions purely for the sake of argument, and then demonstrating that these very assumptions undermine the conclusions the metaphysician wants to draw. Wittgenstein takes a step beyond this sceptical position to argue that the attempts at metaphysical explanation are not just futile but ultimately unintelligible.2 This is a significant difference – it leads Wittgenstein not to suspend judgement between the competing theories, but to dismiss them all. However, the end result of his work is much the same as that of the sceptic – to return us to our ordinary linguistic practices, while abandoning any attempt to ground them in a supposedly deeper metaphysics.

2. The appeal to usage

Wittgenstein’s argument against global scepticism – and indeed much of his argument against local scepticism – depends on his claim that Sceptical doubt would undermine the Sceptic’s understanding of the meanings of the very words she uses to express that doubt. The satisfaction of our ordinary criteria for the application of concepts is what establishes the meanings of those concepts. But we cannot accept those criteria as establishing the meaningfulness of what we say, while refusing to allow them to ever establish its truth.

Admittedly, if you are obeying the order ‘Bring me a book’, you may have to check that the thing you see over there really is a
book. ... And the fact that a word means such-and-such, is used in such-and-such a way, is in turn an empirical fact, like the fact that what you see over there is a book.

Therefore, in order for you to be able to carry out an order, there must be some empirical fact about which you are not in doubt. Doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt. (OC 519)

This argument is based on the idea, central to the thought of the later Wittgenstein, that meaning is use, that the meaning of words is tied up with their usage in ordinary situations. So one can answer local scepticism by pointing out that if, for example, I doubt that I am ever right to say ‘this is a book’ then I can no longer suppose I really understand what ‘book’ means. And, analogously, it seems that one could deal with global scepticism by pointing out that, if I wonder, ‘is this all a dream?’ I can’t be using the word ‘dream’ in the same way that I normally use it, to distinguish dreams from waking states. So what can I mean by it? And if I doubt everything, I surely lose my grip on what the word ‘doubt’ even means, for I am taking it too far from the contexts in which doubts are sometimes raised, and sometimes settled, and where other things are not doubted. There are two possible lines of response to this argument that I want to explore. The first would accept the basic principle of the association of meaning with use, and argue that this does not – or at least not without a good deal more work – yield a knock-down argument against scepticism, realism and idealism. The second response would be to question the status of the principle itself. I will consider these responses in turn in the remainder of this section and in the next.

On the simplest version of the argument, the key premise is that to use a word out of its ‘usual’ contexts must deprive it of meaning. However this cannot be accepted just as it stands. Even for those of us who agree with the basic thrust of Wittgenstein’s thought here, it still needs to be shown why the term cannot be extrapolated to new and broader contexts. We acquire the concept of doubt by contrasting situations in which we are certain with situations in which we are not. But it may be that, when we think more closely about those situations, we come to realize that the contrast between them was more relative than we had supposed. There is in fact a tension here that runs throughout Wittgenstein’s later work. On the one hand he wishes to insist that utterances have meaning only in context, and to combat the errors which arise from confusing different contexts, different language-games. On the other, he insists on the flexibility of language, the lack of sharp boundaries between language-games, the ways in which the
meaning of an expression can develop and alter in unpredictable ways as it is used creatively in new contexts, yet without simply becoming something entirely different and new. The former tendency has sometimes led would-be disciples of his into a kind of neo-essentialism, an insistence that an utterance that uses a concept outside of its usual context can be simply dismissed as meaningless. But this presupposes that language-games are fixed, that what is to count as context is always straightforwardly determinate. Wittgenstein’s countervailing insistence on the fluidity of (many of) our language games, their lack of clear and fixed boundaries, undermines any attempt to simply dismiss claims like those made by Moore or the Sceptic with a dogmatic appeal to common usage. As Richard Eldridge notes, arguing against Baker and Hacker’s ‘orthodox’ Wittgensteinian dismissal of rule-scepticism, they fail to allow for the ‘fluidity’ of the relation between the grammatical and the material; a fluidity that ‘requires acknowledgement of the possibility of reasonableness emerging out of a background of rule-following but going beyond present rule-following and transforming it’ (1997, 211).

Derrida has suggested that a whole range of dualisms can be deconstructed (which is not to say, simply refuted or dismissed) by showing that the one term has to be thought of as having, at least to some extent, the very characteristics that have been ascribed to the contrasting one in the attempt to differentiate them. So when Derrida criticizes the supposed tendency of Western metaphysics to give priority to speech over writing, he does not deny that there are differences between them, nor does he deny any empirical facts – that for most of history most speakers have been illiterate, or that we all learn to speak before learning to write. But he does argue that the characteristics ascribed to writing to distinguish it absolutely from speech (an ‘essential drifting, due to writing as an iterative structure cut off from all absolute responsibility, from consciousness as the authority of the last analysis’ (Derrida 1982, 316)) must on careful consideration be recognized as characterizing even speech to some degree. (There are parallels with Wittgenstein’s argument that even a spoken interpretation or an abstract platonic entity may be as much or as little in need of interpretation as a written sign.) If it is said in reply to this argument that a lack of sharp contrasts between what is and is not doubtful (or even between what is and is not a book) would undermine the meaningfulness of language, then Derrida would reply that meaning is not a matter of absolutes, that it is characterized precisely by a lack of absolute boundaries, a certain ‘essential drifting’. And Wittgenstein’s remarks on family resemblance (PI 65–80) – which point to the indefiniteness, the ‘open texture’, of most concepts, would seem to support this stance.
So, for instance, dreaming scepticism isn’t disposed of by showing that we couldn’t use the word ‘dream’ with meaning unless we could contrast dreams with waking life, for it remains possible that the contrast is more of a relative one than we normally suppose. My waking life, while not a dream in quite the sense in which those states I normally call my dreams are, may not differ from them as much as I like to think. We may (as Berkeley supposed) wake from what we normally call our dreams into states of consciousness whose objects may be more stable and consistent, but no more mind-independent than dream-objects are. And this is a supposition that has been seriously entertained in many cultures, and beyond the merely epistemological context in which scepticism has usually been deployed in the Western tradition. The sense that life is, or may be a dream, or dream-like, is one that has occurred to – and sometimes haunted – many people. As Stephen Clark points out, when students are introduced to Descartes’ sceptical dream argument, they are asked to consider it purely as an intellectual exercise; ‘[N]o one … would be likely to have it drawn to her attention that anyone has ever seriously believed that this life was indeed “a dream and a delusion” (Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2.17.1) and that this made a genuine difference to their lives. But of course many people have believed exactly that …’. Frank Cioffi, in an interesting paper, has collected a number of testimonies to the experience of this intuition, such as the following from Wordsworth: ‘There was a time in my life when I had to push against something that resisted to be sure that there was anything that was outside me. I was sure of my own mind; everything else fell away and vanished into thought.’

I referred above to Wittgenstein’s example from *Zettel* of the realist and idealist parents instructing their children about chairs. His point was that no difference between realism and idealism emerges from such homely examples. But the cases that Clark and Cioffi call to our attention may indeed show up a genuine difference between realism and idealism – a difference not in what one does but in how one experiences the world. And this may not be an insignificant or marginal difference. Idealism is central to the thought and the practice of various schools of Hinduism and of Buddhism. So there are contexts in which the thesis of the mind-dependence or otherwise – the ultimacy or non-ultimacy – of the physical vis-à-vis the mental can make a real and culturally significant difference to people’s lives – even if it isn’t a difference that is detectable in their everyday dealings with furniture. Perhaps chairs, though ‘real’ as compared with hallucinations, are still part of the veil of Maya? It is at least a suggestion that cannot be dismissed simply by appeal to the everyday linguistic practices in which we all share. We
should then be careful not to take Wittgenstein’s appeal to ordinary usage as providing by itself an easy knock-down argument against scepticism. It is at best the starting point for a detailed critique which would have to consider whether there are contexts in which the assertion or denial of the reality of mind-independent objects might make sense.

So to dismiss the claims of sceptics, realists and idealists simply on the ground that they are using words in abnormal ways, is much too quick – even if one accepts Wittgenstein’s association of meaning with use. For usage is much more complex, fluid and sometimes extraordinary than ‘ordinary language’ philosophers have often recognized. This is a point that Stanley Cavell has emphasized; but he has also suggested that Wittgenstein’s accusations of meaninglessness are not based on a dogmatic semantic theory, but on a concern for communication. He states that: ‘What is left out of an expression if it is used “outside its ordinary language-game” is not necessarily what the words mean (they may mean what they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost’ (1979, 207). Considering the objection that it is ‘just outrageous’ to suppose that we cannot be said to know things simply because ‘it is so flamingly obvious’ that we know them, Cavell replies that it will only seem outrageous ‘[t]o someone in a certain grip of philosophising, someone with the sense of the philosopher as Recording Angel, outside the world, neither affecting it nor affected by it, taking stock’ (1979, 211–12). However, this suggested shift of emphasis, while valuable, does not lead to a knock-down refutation (or ‘dissolution’) of scepticism either. (And nor does Cavell himself think it does anything as simple and straightforward as this.)10 When someone uses an expression ‘outside its ordinary language-game’ it does not even follow that the person in question is failing to mean anything (as distinct from the words losing meaning). Rather, we are challenged to find a context for the utterance where it will make sense; perhaps not exactly the same sense which it made in its more familiar settings, but not something completely different either.

Someone ‘goes on’ in their use of language, in their practices of classification, in a way that seems strange and unfamiliar to us – and yet does not seem just wrong (as proceeding 996, 998, 1000, 1004, 1008, when following the rule ‘add 2’ does). Someone suggests that this too is art, or that this too is what justice demands, or that these phenomena can be understood as special cases of those ones. How do we react? Is the proposed extension of the concept too remote from its accepted uses? Would extending it in that way stretch the concept too thin? Or does
the suggestion bring out something about our previous usage that we
hadn’t made explicit to ourselves before? And how do we respond to
those making the proposals? Do we want to align ourselves with them?
Do we see them as reforming or as subverting our community? Will they
make themselves alien to us by developing our concepts in ways which
we cannot accept? If we have rejected essentialism, then we must accept
that these are questions which we must confront and answer in each
particular case, questions that cannot be solved by appealing to any
general algorithm. But a radical extension of our concepts of ‘doubt’ or
‘knowledge’ or ‘dream’ or even ‘reality’ cannot be ruled out a priori. As
Wittgenstein himself noted, what the innovative philosopher (who
asks, for example, ‘Are sense-data the material of which the universe is
made?’) does is not simply to misinterpret a ‘grammatical movement’.
Rather, as he says addressing such a philosopher (whether this figure is
an outsider or an aspect of himself) ‘What you have primarily discov-
ered is a new way of looking at things. As if you had invented a new way
of painting; or, again, a new metre, or a new kind of song’ (PI 401).

3. Metaphilosophy and the primacy of practice

I want now to consider the second response I mentioned to
Wittgenstein’s argument against global scepticism, which goes like this:

Even if we don’t suppose that it provides us with an instant dissolu-
tion of scepticism, Wittgenstein’s argument against the global scep-
tic does depend on the idea (central, of course, to his later thought)
that meaning is use, that ‘[a] meaning of a word is a kind of employ-
ment of it’ (OC 61). Clearly, this argument only works if its premise –
the association of meaning and use – is acceptable. And there is no
reason to suppose that the Sceptic would accept that without further
argument. But debates between philosophers about the nature of
meaning seem as obscure and irresolvable as their debates about the
external world were. If Wittgenstein is appealing to our knowledge of
some principle explaining the nature of meaning, in order to refute
scepticism about our knowledge of other things, then this seems
likely just to lead to another sceptical impasse to add to the original
one. Moreover, Wittgenstein, by his own lights, should not be
advancing an argument which depends on some controversial thesis
about the nature of meaning, given his conviction that philosophy
‘leaves everything as it is’, (PI 124) provides no foundations, explains
nothing, produces no theories.
So what is Wittgenstein doing? He states: ‘For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning”, it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language’ (PI 43). This is unsatisfactory, not only because it fails to explain what the exceptions are, but also because it can too easily be read as though Wittgenstein is attempting a reductive definition of ‘meaning’ in terms of a notion of ‘use’ that can be understood independently. But one thing he certainly did not intend was to produce a reductive, behaviourist theory of meaning, which would explain meaning in terms of dispositions to certain kinds of overt behaviour which could themselves be understood in non-intensional terms. ‘Use’ in Wittgenstein is itself a thoroughly intensional notion. Rather, as Robert Brandom has emphasized, he is pointing us away from the idea that meaning can be explained by explicit rules, and towards an understanding of meaning and normativity as embedded implicitly in practices which cannot themselves be understood in non-normative terms.

Although one can sometimes find a distinctly pre-emptive tone in his writings, Wittgenstein has no dogmatic theory of meaning which would enable him to hand down ex cathedra pronouncements on the meaningfulness or otherwise of any utterance. ‘Meaning is use’ is not like the Verification Principle, a foundationalist formula that allows us to pass judgment on all aspects of human thought. Nor should it be understood as a sketch for a theory of meaning (in the style of Grice, or Dummett or Davidson). Wittgenstein has no magic formula which enables him to decide questions of meaningfulness. What he has is a challenge to us, to show how, in our actual linguistic practices, our words make sense, or what sense it is that they make. But, as I have argued in the section above, he has no simple knock-down argument to show a priori that either a Moorean or a Sceptic could not meet that challenge.

If ‘meaning is use’ is understood in this way, it might seem that the response to Wittgenstein I mentioned at the start of this section has been answered; Wittgenstein isn’t using a controversial theory of meaning as a premise in his argument. But this reply is really too quick. Even if ‘meaning is use’ isn’t a theory of meaning, it does still seem to be a controversial philosophical thesis of some kind. Insofar as Wittgenstein does attempt to justify it, he does so by showing the futility of attempts to explain the meaningfulness of a word by appealing to some (concrete or abstract) entity which would be the meaning of the word. But this does seem to leave Wittgenstein committed to a thesis which we could call ‘the primacy of practice’. Meaning is to be found within our language-games, not prior to them; but language-games are practices,
things we do. Thus meaning depends on practice; and if we are to understand – or stop misunderstanding – meaning, we need to understand ourselves as essentially agents. At a number of points in On Certainty, Wittgenstein emphasizes this point, in comments which have a strikingly foundationalist sound to them:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC 204)

But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting. (OC 110)

And at OC 402 he quotes with evident approval from Goethe’s Faust:

“... and write with confidence:

“In the beginning was the deed.” (OC 402)

Such remarks have led Robert Fogelin to suggest that On Certainty contains some backsliding from the ‘pure’ anti-metaphysical position of the Investigations, where Wittgenstein repudiates any attempts to explain or justify our beliefs, and towards a kind of practical holism where they are justified in terms of an account of practical agency (1994, 209–10, 218–19). Eldridge also notes a move in Wittgenstein’s last writings ‘toward explicit philosophical generality, almost towards a thesis’13 although he sees the move already starting to occur within the Investigations itself, after section 308. Avrum Stroll also sees an important change in Wittgenstein’s thinking between the Investigations and On Certainty, though, unlike Fogelin or Eldridge, he regards it as a significant advance (2002a, 121–3). And it can certainly seem as though Wittgenstein is here forgetting or repudiating his own anti-explanatory and (in the eyes of many commentators) anti-foundational convictions. It does look as though On Certainty attempts to explain our thought, provide foundations for it even, by grounding it in action.14 And isn’t this some sort of philosophical thesis? If this is so, there is surely room for the sceptic to respond to it by questioning whether agency should be given an ultimate priority over thought. (Or in Derridean mode, by questioning whether the two can be distinguished as neatly as that.) If there is something like a priority of action/practice thesis in Wittgenstein, though, I don’t think it is something entirely new in On Certainty although it is undoubtedly made more explicit there. For some such perspective is already, I think, implied in the association of meaning and use which is central to the Investigations.15
So is Wittgenstein contradicting himself here, doing what he says philosophers shouldn’t do? In the *Investigations*, he states: ‘Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything’ (PI 126). But this may not be such a radically non-traditional understanding of philosophy as one might think. Many philosophers would claim to have simply been trying to get us to see how things are – but they would of course differ radically in what they think we would see when ‘everything’ is ‘put before us’. Might it be, for instance, that we ‘just see’ that an ungrounded way of acting is at the bottom of our language games? Is that an explanatory theory, or simply a reminder of our practices which lie open to view? And can we really tell the difference anyway? Wittgenstein states that ‘We must do away with all explanation and description alone must take its place’ (PI 109). But can’t a good description explain things? And can’t an explanation be given by describing some hitherto overlooked facts? It seems again that one can appeal to Wittgenstein’s own anti-essentialist (or if you like, ‘deconstructionist’ side) to undermine the over-rigid dualism which appears to determine his account of what philosophy should be.

It is worth noting, though, that Wittgenstein does not in fact say what many commentators seem to think he does, that philosophy cannot advance *theses*; only that, if it did, everyone would agree with them (PI 128). But of course, he can’t mean that literally, since he insists that we tend to tie ourselves into such confusions that we often cannot see what is right in front of us (PI 122, 129). (In which case, nor is it literally true that ‘nothing is hidden’ (PI 435: cf. 126); though it is we who hide things from ourselves – the hiddenness is not in the nature of things.) So he must mean that anyone *who is seeing things clearly* would agree with whatever theses philosophy advanced. In which case, the primacy of practice might be a legitimate philosophical thesis – one which anyone who was unconfused would assent to as to something obvious. But there is no criterion for someone being unconfused apart from their willingness to assent to such theses, or to refrain from producing other, confused ones. (That is to say, theses which the uncorrupted can see are confused. But then how do we know who the uncorrupted are? Well, they are the ones who can see the confusions ...) In the end, then, Wittgenstein’s metaphilosophical position does not seem to differ so much from say, Kant’s, or Spinoza’s or Plato’s;16 the truths of philosophy will not appear controversial to those who are thinking clearly; but few of us are, so for most of us they will appear controversial.

I don’t think the ‘pure’ anti-metaphysical position (one that involves making no positive philosophical assertions at all) that some commentators have ascribed to Wittgenstein is really tenable. To simply point
out, in the manner of a dogmatic ‘ordinary-language’ philosopher, that a
metaphysician or a sceptic is using language in unusual ways, or
employing an expression outside its normal context, has by itself no
critical force; the metaphysician or sceptic may be well aware of doing
so. And it is perfectly reasonable for her to ask why she should not do
so. If the answer is that expressions lose their meanings outside of
ordinary language-games, the ordinary-language philosopher needs to
back up this claim with some justification, some explanation of why
that is so. This need not (should not) take the form of a quasi-scientific
‘theory of meaning’; it can be a ‘perspicuous representation’\textsuperscript{17} of our
linguistic and other practices which will enable the metaphysician or
sceptic to ‘just see’ the primacy of practice and the connection of
meaning with use. This methodology distinguishes Wittgenstein from
many analytic philosophers, who did and still do, seek quasi-scientific
theoretical explanations, but it does not distinguish him from the
Phenomenological School, which also sought a descriptive philosophy,
which would provide perspicuous representations. However, the
Phenomenologists were quite clear that theirs was a transcendental
enterprise, one searching for conditions of possibility; something which
Wittgenstein seems to have wanted to avoid explicitly admitting.

One way of explaining Wittgenstein’s apparently purely negative
conception of philosophy is to say that there are only the particular
language-games/forms of life/practices and so on; there is no space for a
meta-language-game which would somehow provide the foundations/
justifications for the others. But we still need to ask: is there something
that we are presupposing in calling them all ‘language-games’? And the
answer would seem to be that these are all activities that are engaged in
by language-using agents. The condition for the possibility of all the
language-games we play is our existence as the beings who use language.
Wittgenstein explains his conception of the relation between basic
‘framework’ assumptions and ordinary empirical beliefs by using the
metaphor of a river bank, distinguishing between the sand which is
easily washed away and the ‘hard rock, subject to no alteration or only
to an imperceptible one’ (OC 99). If we ask whether even our most appar-
ently fundamental beliefs can change, Wittgenstein seems equivocal –
as the uncertainty about whether the ‘hard rock’ can be altered at all
indicates. He does say that ‘it seems impossible to say in any individual
case that such-and-such must be beyond doubt if there is to be a
language-game’ (OC 519), though language-games are only possible if
‘some empirical judgement or other’ is not doubted. But this claim
clearly presupposes a deeper underlying necessity – if there are to be
judgements at all, there have to be judgers – beings who can use meaningful language. And if Wittgenstein is right that meaning is bound up with usage and activity of various kinds (the meaning of ‘book’ is connected to our ability to do things with books), then these language-users must be agents engaged with entities distinct from themselves – beings-in-the-world, as Heidegger would have it. It follows from this that there are certain beliefs about ourselves that we cannot revise – that we are agents, that we are bound by and able to respond to norms of rationality and meaning.

One way of seeing this is to consider what one sometimes sees suggested: that the mentalistic understanding of ourselves as free rational conscious agents, and the scientific account of ourselves as simply complex physical mechanisms do not really contradict one another, as it seems; they are simply two different language-games, each generating its own internal standards of correctness. This won’t do; the mentalistic game must be given a certain priority, since it is only in mentalistic terms that it makes sense to think of anything being a language-game at all. A purely physicalist argot would not have room for such concepts as meaning, truth, experience etc; and without these the concept of science itself would become meaningless. Presupposed in the very idea of a language-game is a certain understanding of human beings as rational agents; or better, as beings who act within a world of meanings. Hence, Wittgenstein’s critique of scepticism, and, more deeply, of the metaphysical realism on which it is parasitic, depends on an understanding of meaning which is in turn bound up with an understanding of human agency. And this is not a piece of empirical anthropology or sociology; it has a transcendental status, for it is presupposed, at least implicitly, in any kind of empirical enquiry that we might undertake.

4. Wittgenstein, Heidegger and the transcendental

Wittgenstein’s critique of scepticism is really a side-effect of his more basic critique of the metaphysical ambition (shared by realists and idealists alike) to enjoy absolute knowledge (the view from nowhere). As I noted at the end of Section 1 above, global scepticism emerges as a protest against such ambitions, arguing that they must fail on their own terms. (We cannot justify against their rivals, any theories which purport to tell us how things are in themselves.) Wittgenstein aims to show not just the failure, but the incoherence of the metaphysical enterprise; and if he succeeds in that, he undermines scepticism also. (If realism and idealism are both nonsense, then there are no rival theories to suspend judgement
between.) But his anti-metaphysical argument depends on the ‘thesis’ (if that is what it is) of the primacy of practice, and this has, not an empirical but a transcendental status. Wittgenstein is therefore committed to a stance which one could call transcendental pragmatism; however, he seems to have been deeply reluctant to spell this out explicitly.

Wittgenstein’s case for the primacy of practice is essentially negative, and consists in the patient unravelling of confused attempts to find a basis for meaning external to practices. In this way the primacy of practice perhaps ‘shows itself’. However, as Eldridge has argued, the very structure of the *Investigations*, moving constantly between new proposals to ground our practices, and exposures of their futility which never quite succeed in putting an end to our hankering for such explanations, itself dramatizes an inability to wholly abandon the metaphysical project.20 For Wittgenstein’s argument to be truly convincing, for it to ‘give philosophy peace’ (PI 133), the understanding of human being, and of our relation to the world that it presupposes but never properly articulates, needs to be made explicit. ‘A picture held us captive’ (PI 115) and for all the brilliance with which Wittgenstein attempts to unravel the particular confused ideas to which the picture gives rise, we will not be freed from it until we are given a better picture of ourselves and our relation to the world.

I take it that this is what Heidegger set out to do – and I think, largely succeeded in doing – in *Being and Time*, and one can therefore see (the early) Heidegger as providing an explicit statement of the assumptions underlying (the later) Wittgenstein’s philosophical practice. Heidegger, like Wittgenstein, is concerned with the kind of global scepticism which suspends judgement as between realist and idealist accounts of the external world, and like Wittgenstein, he does not attempt to resolve that doubt by embracing either realism or idealism, but by rejecting the debate between them as arising from a shared misunderstanding. And, like Wittgenstein also, he takes that common misunderstanding to have arisen from a neglect of the fundamental importance of agency. But he understands too, and points out much more explicitly than Wittgenstein, that any kind of human thought presupposes some understanding of ourselves which has a transcendental rather than a purely empirical status:

Sciences are ways of Being in which Dasein [Heidegger’s term for human beings insofar as they play this transcendental, meaning-conferring role] comports itself towards entities which need not be itself. But to Dasein, Being in a world is something that belongs essentially. ... So whenever an ontology takes for its theme entities
whose character of Being is other than that of Dasein, it has its own foundation and motivation in Dasein’s own ontical structure, in which a pre-ontological understanding of Being is comprised as a definite characteristic. (1962, 33)

*Being and Time* is therefore an attempt to give a detailed account of this self-understanding of ourselves as agents – as beings-in-the-world – and the understanding of the world that goes with it. This account is intended to have a universal validity; the understanding of Dasein it articulates is presupposed by all forms of thought and culture. It forms the basis for all the particular achievements of different human cultures, and is therefore that which makes it possible for there to be understanding between different cultures. Nicholas Gier, although he emphasises the important commonalities between Wittgenstein and the Phenomenological tradition, has suggested that it is on this point that Wittgenstein most differs from Heidegger and the Phenomenologists in general. Gier sees Wittgenstein as opting instead for a Spenglerian relativism which sees different cultures as essentially isolated from one another (1981, 227–9). If the argument of Section 3 above is correct though, this cannot be right. Wittgenstein would turn out to be committed to an understanding of our being-in-the-world strikingly similar to that which Heidegger presents in *Being and Time* – and one can take the remarks about the primacy of practice in *On Certainty* to be an acknowledgement of this fact.

Even if one accepts the primacy of practice and the rejection of traditional forms of realism and idealism – and therefore of scepticism – which follows from that, there remains the possibility, which I raised in Section 2, that one might find a way of making sense of those doctrines or stances within our practices. Wittgenstein perhaps hints at this when he remarks that, when Realists or Idealists consider the claim ‘There are physical objects’, ‘this assertion, or its opposite, is a misfiring attempt to express what can’t be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shown; but that isn’t the end of the matter’ (OC 37). I think one can see some of Heidegger’s later works as an attempt to explore what might be meant, in a radically non-metaphysical sense, by the recognition (and therefore the denial) of the independent reality of things.21 Cavell has made some tentative efforts to consider how such ideas might be related to aspects of Wittgenstein’s thought and to both his and Heidegger’s Romantic precursors.22 But to explore these themes further would be, at the very least, a task for another chapter. What I hope to have done here is to indicate the directions in which we need to
continue thinking if we are to go beyond what Wittgenstein achieved in *On Certainty* and towards a still deeper understanding of the significance of philosophical scepticism.

Notes

2. Moser defends a form of global scepticism in *Philosophy After Objectivity* (1993), chapter 1. He opposes both the metaphysical claim that we can know the ultimate nature of reality and the Wittgensteinian claim that the whole issue is ultimately unintelligible. On page 57 he asserts ‘What is intelligible for us can … outstrip what is effectively answerable or testable by us …. We may retain ordinary language, but we are not entitled to assume that we have … non-question begging epistemic evidence for claims about conceiving-independent facts.’
5. See the Rule-following considerations, PI 185–241. I don’t want to exaggerate the parallels between Wittgenstein and Derrida, though they do exist. For an antidote to such exaggeration, see M. Stone ‘Wittgenstein on Deconstruction’ (2000).
6. Wittgenstein does not use this argument in *OC*, but he does dismiss dreaming scepticism for somewhat different reasons in *OC* 383 and 676. His arguments there seem pretty weak to me, though I don’t have the space to consider them in detail here.
9. For that matter, even in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there is a fundamental commitment to the mind-dependence of the physical world. To be sure, it is God’s mind on which the world is understood to depend – but no serious idealist philosopher has ever maintained that the physical world depends simply on your mind or mine. That theism involves a kind of idealism is however, a conclusion that many theists seem interestingly reluctant to draw.
10. I have found Cavell’s remarks about ‘the truth of Skepticism’ stimulating, though his point seems to be rather different from the one I am wanting to make here. See R. Eldridge’s helpful essay, ‘A Continuing Task: Cavell and the Truth of Skepticism’ in R. Fleming and M. Payne (eds) *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1989).

15. It is also asserted pretty explicitly in ‘Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness’ (CE), written in 1937.

16. William Brenner has pointed out to me that Wittgenstein’s methodology can be seen as a ‘demythologised’ version of that practised by Socrates in the *Meno*; he is trying to make us aware of what we have really known all along.

17. PI 122: ‘The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things.’

18. This is, obviously, a mere synopsis of an argument that I don’t have the space to make here; but the point has been extensively and effectively argued elsewhere. See e.g., H. Putnam, ‘Why Reason Can’t be Naturalised’ in his *Realism and Reason, Philosophical Papers Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); S. Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), chapter 8.

19. This is what Kant called ‘transcendental realism’ – and it should be noted that he considered Berkeley to be as much a transcendental realist as Locke.

20. This interpretation of the *Investigations* (up to PI 308, anyway) is defended in fascinating detail in Eldridge (1997).


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Part III
The Epistemic Reading
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9
The Contexts of Knowing

Thomas Morawetz

Part A: The uses of ‘I know …’

1. On knowing and saying ‘I know …’

One of the most seductive traps for the novice philosopher is to draw the following inference. She will note correctly that perennial philosophical questions, such as the concept of knowledge, may be usefully addressed by examining speech acts, such as claims to know. From that methodological insight, she may infer that there is a one-to-one relationship between having knowledge and being in a position to claim, ‘I know …’. She may assume that whenever one has knowledge, one may appropriately claim to know.

In On Certainty, Ludwig Wittgenstein makes clear how seriously wrong that assumption would be. Of all the infinitely many things one knows at any given time, only an infinitesimal subclass makes up the appropriate subjects for knowledge-claims. Consider the following passages from On Certainty.

I am sitting talking to a friend. Suddenly I say: ‘I knew all along that you were so-and-so’. Is that really just a superfluous, though true, remark? (OC 464)

Do I know that I am now sitting in a chair? – Don’t I know it?! In the present circumstances no one is going to say that I know this; but no more will he say, for example, that I am conscious. Nor will one normally say this of the passers-by in the street.

But now, even if one doesn’t say it, does that make it untrue?? (OC 552)

It is queer: if I say, without any special occasion, ‘I know’ – for example, ‘I know that I am now sitting in a chair’, this statement seems to me
unjustified and presumptuous. But if I make the same statement where there is some need for it, then, although I am not a jot more certain of its truth, it seems to me to be perfectly justified and every-day. (OC 553)

Thus it seems to me that I have known something the whole time, and yet there is no meaning in saying so, in uttering this truth. (OC 466)

I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again ‘I know that that’s a tree’, pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: ‘This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy.’ (OC 467)

All these situations are ones in which it may correctly be said of me that I know many things, but at the same time it would be pointless for me to claim to know them. At OC 552, Wittgenstein implies that it is true both that I am sitting in a chair and that I know I am sitting in a chair. The utterance is ‘unjustified and presumptuous’ not in the sense of being dubious and questionable, but in the sense of presuming a context in which such an utterance addresses a shared concern and in which justifications, if needed, can be summoned.

A general point about speech acts is expressed at OC 553. They are never simply utterances, characterizations of, for example, my state of mind; speech is for some communicative or expressive purpose. Understanding what is said generally depends on understanding why it is said and understanding what grounds may appropriately be given for the utterance. We may think there is a clear distinction between meaning and use, between the semantics and the pragmatics of language;¹ we imagine the possibility of saying, ‘I know what you said, but I simply don’t know why you said it’. But the distinction is illusory. Do we know really know what one is claiming when she says, ‘I know my own name’, unless we know whether she is marking her recovery from amnesia, or making an obvious point with sarcasm, or reminding us that she has been assigned a provisional name in a game? We do not know the meaning of ‘I am sitting on the chair’ if we do not know whether the utterance is a response to ‘I’ve had shocking news; are you sitting down?’ or a report of how one is responding to the obstreperous misbehaviour of the chairperson of one’s meeting. Knowledge-claims, like other claims, are dependent on context.²

For the most part we can invent or imagine one or more contexts in which claiming to know a particular putative object of knowledge makes sense. We have just devised contexts for ‘I know my own name’. However,
certain kinds of putative knowledge-claims tax or strain this particular gift for invention. They seem to allude not to particular kinds of empirical knowledge, to matters that can be learned, doubted and investigated in at least some contexts, however odd, but rather to regulative or methodological aspects about our ways of thinking in general. ‘I know there are physical objects’ might be an utterance of that peculiar kind. Can we ever make sense of it by providing a context?3 Under virtually all circumstances, the claim would raise eyebrows and prompt puzzlement.

2. Knowing and showing that I know

Wittgenstein points out that my actions make evident many things that I know, and this is commonly the case in situations in which it would be strange and unsettling to claim to know these things. I accompany my colleagues to the cafeteria in the basement of the faculty building, and I lead the way. My actions show that I know, but I would induce more than puzzlement were I to proclaim, ‘I know where the cafeteria is!’ to friends with whom I have shared it for 12 years.

‘I know that this room is on the second floor, that behind the door a short landing leads to the stairs, and so on.’ One could imagine cases where I should come out with this, but they would be extremely rare. But on the other hand I shew this knowledge day in, day out by my actions and also in what I say. (OC 431)

Now what does someone else gather from these actions and words of mine? Won’t it be just that I am sure of my grounds? – From the fact that I have been living here for many weeks and have gone up and down these stairs every day he will gather that I know where my room is situated. – I shall give him the assurance ‘I know’ when he does not already know things which would have compelled the conclusion that I knew.

When we understand the distinction between knowing and claiming to know, understand in particular the context-bound character of the latter, we see that the question, ‘When can I be said to know p?’ has several meanings. It may be a question about when it is true of me that I know p. Alternatively, it may be a question about when it is appropriate for me to claim that I know p. Third, it may be a question about when it is appropriate for others to attribute to me knowledge of p, to say about me that I know p.

Consider the first possibility. When it is true of me that I know p, what is it that is being attributed to me? Is it a mental state, a disposition to behave, a special qualification? Is knowing a way of behaving, or a way of being disposed to behave, or a state of being that may or may not be
made evident in behaviour? The following passages give clues how Wittgenstein would respond to these possibilities: ‘For how does a man learn to recognize his own state of knowing something?’ (OC 589); ‘... I use the words “I know that ...” to say that I am in a certain state’ (OC 588), but ‘[a]n inner experience cannot shew me that I know something’ (OC 569). Rather, ‘[t]he utterance “I know ...” can only have its meaning in connection with the other evidence of my “knowing”’ (OC 432). One typically gives evidence of knowing or reasons for knowing. OC 14 says: ‘That he does know takes some shewing’. This implies that knowing is a matter of being disposed to behave in a certain way.

An inner experience cannot show that I know $p$ because knowing $p$ is something that others will conclude about me, and that conclusion will be a judgement that I am qualified to do certain things, to give grounds or evidence for my knowing $p$. I may not have to perform if others are willing to concede the qualification to me, and in that sense knowing is a state rather than an activity. The connection between knowing and acting is logical and not causal. My knowing $p$ is not an inner state of being that causes me to act in certain ways, for example to give grounds, but rather it is manifested when I act in such ways. My inability to give adequate grounds is not simply evidence that I do not know $p$; it can be tantamount to my not knowing $p$. Inability and failure to give grounds are not the same because in the latter case I may be devious and try to lead others to believe that I do not know $p$ when in fact I do.4

I may satisfy myself that I know $p$ in much the same way that I may satisfy others, by giving reasons that count as sufficient evidence of $p$. In doing so, I may possibly surprise myself, either by failing to do what I thought I could do, or by doing what I thought I probably could not do. In the former case, I may describe the structure of the DNA molecule wrongly and concede that I do not have knowledge that I thought I had. Or I may succeed in the face of my own serious and perhaps well-grounded misgivings. Although my performance, my description, may occur in private, for example as a rehearsal for a lecture, it is essential that it can be given publicly (interpersonally) and that the judgement of others whether I know can in appropriate circumstances trump my own conviction.5

Others may have two kinds of doubts about my claims to know $p$. On one hand, they may have doubts about $p$. On the other hand, their doubts may be about me and my capacities; they may doubt that $I$ know $p$. Satisfactorily giving evidence will quell both kinds of doubts. In some cases, where doubt is only of the second kind, my reasons will convey no new information about $p$ because such information will
already be shared. All I may demonstrate is my qualification to join the club of those who know $p$. This, I take it, is Wittgenstein’s point in the following passage:

But don’t I use the words ‘I know that …’ to say that I am in a certain state, whereas the mere assertion ‘that is a …’ does not say this? And yet one often does reply to such an assertion by asking ‘how do you know?’ – ‘But surely, only because the fact that I assert this gives to understand that I think I know it.’ – This point could be made in the following way: In a zoo there might be a notice ‘this is a zebra’; but never ‘I know this is a zebra’.

‘I know’ has a meaning only when it is uttered by a person. But, given that, it is a matter of indifference whether what is uttered is ‘I know …’ or ‘That is …’. (OC 588)

3. First-person and third-person knowing claims

Having examined the distinction between my knowing and my claiming to know, we can transpose the distinction to the comparison of what others (third persons) know, on the one hand, and what may be said about them, on the other. At OC 353, Wittgenstein describes a forester who gathers his cutters, points out the trees to be cut, and then proclaims, ‘I know that that’s a tree’. He then draws our attention to an observer remarking, ‘He knows that that’s a tree – he doesn’t examine it, or order his men to examine it’.

We need special circumstances to make sense of both remarks. Imagine that eco-terrorists have salted the woods with trees sculpted out of metal, artworks made to look just like genuine trees to frustrate and impede the cutters. In that case, both comments would be in order, because both would indicate that the forester has satisfied himself that the tree in question is genuine and is prepared to give reasons. The two comments, the first-person and the third-person one, are significantly different. The first-person comment commits the speaker to give reasons for thinking $p$ is true, or at least for indicating why and how she is qualified to give such reasons (‘I know that’s tree because I inspected it closely’). The third-person comment only commits the speaker to give reasons for thinking the other party is qualified to demonstrate the truth of $p$. The third-party claims no such knowledge herself.

Both first- and third-person claims of this kind are fallible, but in different ways. A first-person claim to know fails when the speaker proves unable to point to adequate grounds or evidence of knowing. (Similarly, a first-person claim not to know, to be ignorant, fails when
he surprises himself and us by giving adequate grounds for knowing: ‘I didn’t realize I still remembered the structure of DNA.’) A third person’s claim is validated or not by the first person’s capacity to perform. She need not accept the first-person claim to know at face value, and her own claim about another’s knowledge or lack of knowledge is fallible whenever that person’s performance does not accord with her claim. In the following passages, Wittgenstein makes clear that even some immediate, kinaesthetic knowledge-claims are fallible.

Could one say ‘I know the position of my hands with my eyes closed’, if the position I gave always or mostly contradicted the evidence of other people? (502)

Whether I know something depends on whether the evidence backs me up or contradicts me. (504)

The same can surely be said about ‘I know I’ve been in this room at some point in the distant past’ or ‘Your face is so familiar; I know we’ve met before’. Evidence in either case may be hard or even impossible to find, but in principle I either have or have not been in the room or met the person bearing the face, and I can be wrong. The same cannot be said about the claims I might make to my doctor, ‘I know I’ve been feeling pain in my lower back for at least a week’, or ‘I know I’ve had less energy this month than ever before’. Neither claim alludes to a past public or interpersonal occurrence or commits me to a public demonstration of evidence. The claims may in fact be false – and it is distinctive of hypochondria that persons delude themselves about somatic disorders. But the superfluous use of ‘I know …’ in these contexts is criticized by Wittgenstein as giving a false picture of the status (relevance of evidence, corrigibility) of claims about such conditions.

The wrong use made by Moore of the proposition ‘I know …’ lies in his regarding it as an utterance as little subject to doubt as ‘I am in pain’. And since from ‘I know it is so’ there follows ‘It is so’, then the latter can’t be doubted either. (OC 178)

And at OC 504, Wittgenstein reiterates that ‘[w]hether I know something depends on whether the evidence backs me up or contradicts me. For to say that one knows one has a pain means nothing.’

4. Knowing claims and similar locutions

To what extent are ‘p’ and ‘I know that p’ interchangeable? Just as the utterance ‘I know that p’ commits the speaker to giving reasons or
grounds for \( p \) where \( p \) is in question, the simple utterance ‘\( p \)’ does so as well. (‘Today we bombed Iraq.’ ‘How do you know?’):

But doesn’t ‘I know that that’s a tree’ say something different from ‘that is a tree’? (OC 585)

In the first sentence a person is mentioned, in the second, not. But that does not shew that they have different meanings. At all events one often replaces the first form by the second, and then often gives the latter a special intonation. For one speaks differently when one makes an uncontradicted assertion from when one maintains an assertion in the face of contradiction. (OC 587)

‘I know what kind of tree that is. – It is a chestnut.’
‘I know what kind of tree that is. – I know it’s a chestnut.’

The first statement sounds more natural than the second. One will only say ‘I know’ second time if one wants especially to emphasize certainty; perhaps to anticipate being contradicted. The first ‘I know’ means roughly: I can say it.

But in another case, one might begin with the observation ‘that’s a …’, and then, when this is contradicted, counter by saying: ‘I know what sort of tree it is’, and by this means lay emphasis on being sure. (OC 591)

Perhaps one can add that saying ‘I know that \( p \)’ makes explicit something that is merely implicit in the utterance ‘\( p \)’. The former affirms that I am a participant in the linguistic practice of giving grounds for \( p \) and that I am committed to giving such grounds. ‘How do you know?’ may be a request for such grounds or it may be a request simply for my credentials or qualifications. I may reply by offering grounds or by explaining how I came into a position to be able to offer grounds. In the latter case, I may, perhaps appropriately, say ‘I could give you my reasons but they would be too technical for you to understand.’

The fact that the explicit form of the claim, ‘I know that \( p \)’, has special uses comes clear when one looks at the negative form of the two utterances. Thus, at OC 593, Wittgenstein observes that ‘[e]ven when one can replace “I know” by “It is …” still one cannot replace the negation of the one by the negation of the other. With “I don’t know …” a new element enters our language-games.’ This statement about negation is potentially ambiguous. ‘I know \( p \)’ bears the same relationship to ‘\( p \)’ as ‘I know that \( p \) is not the case’ (or ‘I know not-\( p \)’) bears to ‘\( p \) is not the case’. One might suppose that the latter pair is the negation of the former pair. But Wittgenstein is concerned with a different kind of negation,
‘I don’t know …’ The point is apparently that, however interchangeable the two affirmative utterances are in many contexts, only ‘I know $p$’ explicitly states both the truth of $p$ and the fact that I bear a particular relationship to $p$. ‘I don’t know $p$’ denies that that relationship exists. Wittgenstein draws attention to this kind of relationship in the following:

‘I know’ has a primitive meaning similar to and related to ‘I see’ (‘wissen’, ‘videre’). And ‘I knew he was in the room, but he wasn’t in the room’ is like ‘I saw him in the room, but he wasn’t there’. ‘I know’ is supposed to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like ‘I believe’) but between me and a fact. (OC 90)

Not knowing $p$ cannot be expressed implicitly in the same way as knowing $p$. When said explicitly, ‘I don’t know $p$’ means explicitly that I am not qualified to give compelling grounds for $p$ and implicitly it can raise doubts about $p$ itself.

Wittgenstein considers several near-synonyms for ‘I know …’. At OC 176, he says: ‘Instead of “I know it” one may say in some cases “That’s how it is – rely upon it”’. In some cases, however “I learned it years and years ago”; and sometimes: “I am sure it is so.” ’ At 561, however, he hints at reservations: ‘ “I know” and “You can rely on it”. But one cannot always substitute the latter for the former.’ Moreover, at OC 563, he compares ‘I know’ and ‘I am sure’ to make clear the differences:

One says ‘I know that he is in pain’ although one can produce no convincing grounds for this. – Is this the same as ‘I am sure that he …’? – No. ‘I am sure’ tells you my subjective certainty. ‘I know’ means that I who know it, and the person who doesn’t are separated by a difference in understanding. (Perhaps based on a difference in degree of experience.)

If I say ‘I know’ in mathematics, then the justification for this is a proof.

If in these two cases instead of ‘I know’, one says ‘you can rely on it’ then the substantiation is of a different kind in each case.

And substantiation comes to an end. (OC 563)

It is hardly clear what the difference in ‘substantiation’ is, but it seems plausible that Wittgenstein means that ‘You can rely on it’ and ‘I am sure’ are used to forestall giving grounds and to affirm the speaker’s authoritative position vis-à-vis the substance of the claim. ‘You can rely on it’ reflects a reluctance or unwillingness to provide grounds, perhaps because, under the given circumstances, they are
unavailable. ‘I know’ may, of course, be used in a similar way, but it is also used as a prelude to the giving of grounds. Incidentally, it is not clear whether Wittgenstein, in his example, ‘I know he is in pain’, means to say that I can never give convincing grounds for such an assertion or simply that in some circumstances I cannot do so. The former would surely be wrong. Seeing someone injured, measuring and determining his brain wave activity, or simply watching his behaviour can in various situations provide altogether convincing grounds for the claim.9

The contrast between ‘I know’ and ‘I am sure’ (or ‘I am certain’) can be drawn similarly. At OC 243, Wittgenstein writes: ‘One says “I know” when one is ready to give compelling grounds. “I know” relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light’. Neither ‘I am sure’ nor ‘I am certain’, by contrast, is tantamount to a commitment to giving grounds or even having them, although both are compatible with having and giving grounds. Thus it seems that Wittgenstein wishes to contrast the ‘subjective’ or personal attitude toward a fact expressed by ‘I am sure’ and ‘I am certain’ with the objective or intersubjective commitment to giving grounds expressed by ‘I know …’.

5. Knowing and guaranteeing

At OC 12, Wittgenstein says that ‘“I know” seems to describe a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact’. Implying that this is mistaken, he adds, ‘[o]ne always forgets the expression “I thought I knew”’. In what sense does the knowledge-claim seem to guarantee what is known? The answer lies in the atemporal logic of knowing claims. ‘I know $p$’ is true only if $p$ is true. The same cannot be said about such subjective attitudes or postures as thinking (that $p$ is true), believing, being certain, being sure and so on. On discovering that $p$ is not true, I will continue to say ‘I thought, believed that it was so, but I was wrong; I was certain, I was sure but …’. I cannot logically say ‘I knew it but I was wrong’. In other words, the discovery of $p$’s falsity will end my belief and certainty, curtail my sense of sureness, make me think differently … but it will not end my state of knowing. Instead, it will lead me to concede that I never knew it but only thought I did.

The fact that a claim to know $p$ cannot guarantee the truth of $p$ is obscure or puzzling to those who confuse the correct view that I cannot know something that is false with the preposterous view that I cannot claim to know anything that is false. Accordingly, a claim to know $p$, unlike a claim to believe $p$, can be falsified by a showing that one’s
grounds are not compelling or exhaustive. In that case, one must withdraw one’s claim to know \( p \) and concede that \( p \) is unsupported and possibly wrong. One need not withdraw one's claim to believe \( p \) unless it is established that \( p \) is false; if one does change one’s mind, one will still maintain that one believed \( p \) but came to think differently. By contrast, my knowing something does not come to end at the moment I begin questioning \( p \) or am convinced that it is wrong. In such cases, my knowing it is, in fact, a condition I was never in, an objective relationship to the fact that I never had. I only thought I knew.

This is Wittgenstein’s point when he asks at OC 487: ‘What is the proof that I know something?’ and answers: ‘Most certainly not my saying I know it’. At OC 22, he notes: ‘It would surely be remarkable if we had to believe the reliable person who says “I can’t be wrong”’. Later, he adds, perhaps a bit rashly: ‘It might surely happen that whenever I said “I know” it turned out to be wrong’ (OC 580). This seems rash if one considers the following:

‘If my memory deceives me here it can deceive me everywhere.’
‘If I don’t know that, how do I know if my words mean what I believe they mean? (OC 506)

‘If this deceives me, what does “deceive” mean any more?’ (OC 507)

Why, would it be unthinkable that I should stay in the saddle however much the facts bucked? (OC 616)

Certain events would put me into a position in which I could not go on with the old language-game any further. In which I was torn away from the sureness of the game.

Indeed, doesn’t it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts? (OC 617)

The situation in which all my claims to know turn out to be wrong seems to be one in which the facts buck so as to throw me from the saddle, one in which I cannot go on with the language-game of claiming to know. Thus, while it is certainly the case that saying ‘I know’ never insures the truth of the claim, the persistence of the language-game of making knowledge-claims may be predicated on the truth or success of at least some of those claims.

If I were contradicted on all sides and told that this person’s name was not what I had always known it was (and I use ‘know’ here intentionally), then in that case the foundation of all judging would be taken away from me. (OC 614)
Now does that mean: ‘I can only make judgments at all because things behave thus and thus (as it were, behave kindly)?’ (OC 615)

The main point here, that claims to know $p$ may assure others of the truth of $p$ but never insure the truth of $p$, is based on tacit awareness of the various ways in which a knowledge-claim can fail. One way is through deceit. An informant may simply be trying to deceive us about $p$. A different kind of deceit occurs when she is trying to deceive us about her qualifications. She may claim to know $p$ when she is aware that she is unqualified to make the claim, that she’s just guessing. Both of these possibilities may occur not through deceit but through the alternative kind of failure, mistake. Thus, the informant may believe $p$ when in fact $p$ is false. And a different kind of mistake may occur, the informant may believe she has adequate grounds for $p$ when she does not, and that may be the case notwithstanding the truth of $p$ itself. Accordingly, Wittgenstein says

For it is not as though the proposition ‘It is so’ could be inferred from someone else’s utterance: ‘I know it is so.’ Nor from the utterance together with its not being a lie. – But can’t I infer ‘It is so’ from my own utterance ‘I know, etc.’? Yes; and also ‘There is a hand there’ follows from the proposition ‘He knows that there’s a hand there’. But from his utterance ‘I know …’ it does not follow that he does know it. (OC 13)

Here, Wittgenstein trips over his own insights into confusion. Contrary to his assertion, I cannot infer ‘It is so’ from my own utterance ‘I know etc.’ any more than I can infer from my own utterance that I have not made a mistake. I can infer ‘It is so’ from the truth of my utterance, but not the utterance alone. Similarly, I can infer that there is a hand there from the proposition, taken as true, that ‘he knows that there is a hand there’, but I can infer nothing about the existence of the hand from his utterance.

6. Knowledge and belief

One form of scepticism can be expressed as the view that, since I may be mistaken in every one of my knowledge-claims, I should replace claims to know with assertions of belief. When I say ‘I know $p$’, I should more properly say ‘I believe I know $p$’. Wittgenstein asks, ‘Suppose it were forbidden to say “I know” and only allowed to say “I believe I know”?’ (OC 366). He suggests that this misbegotten suggestion is a confused response to the discovery of the fallibility of knowledge-claims,
that it is a way of signalling the hubristic quality of knowledge-claims insofar as they seem to insure their truth:

Isn’t it the purpose of construing a word like ‘know’ analogously to ‘believe’ that then opprobrium attaches to the statement ‘I know’ if the person who makes it is wrong?

As a result a mistake becomes something forbidden. (OC 367)

Belief is not simply a more modest way of making a claim, not simply a way of revising one’s knowledge-claims in light of their fallibility. Rather, belief and knowledge-claims play different roles in the language-game. Each has its own special uses. The following passages make clear the separate realms.

Someone with bad sight asks me: ‘do you believe that the thing we can see there is a tree?’ I reply ‘I know it is; I can see it clearly and am familiar with it’. – A: ‘Is N.N. at home?’ – I: ‘I believe he is.’ – A: ‘Was he at home yesterday?’ – I: ‘Yesterday he was – I know he was; I spoke to him.’ – A: ‘Do you know or only believe that this part of the house is built on later than the rest?’ – I: ‘I know it is; I got it from so and so.’ (OC 483)

In these cases, then, one says ‘I know’ and mentions how one knows, or at least one can do so. (OC 484)

We can also imagine a case where someone goes through a list of propositions and as he does so keeps asking: ‘Do I know that or do I only believe it?’ He wants to check the certainty of each individual proposition. It might be a question of making a statement as a witness before a court. (OC 485)

‘Do you know or do you only believe that your name is L. W.?’ Is that a meaningful question?

Do you know or do you only believe that what you are writing down now are German words? Do you only believe that ‘believe’ has this meaning? What meaning? (OC 486)

Passages 483 through 485, especially the last, make clear the appropriate uses of knowing and believing. Only in some cases does ‘I believe’ mark a more attenuated commitment to a fact than a claim to know. It does so, for example, in the example of being unsure whether N.N. is at home today. In other cases we say ‘I believe p’ when we hold very strongly to the truth of p but cannot give reasons that we expect others to recognize and accept as adequate grounds. What all these cases have in common is that knowing claims, and not belief claims, involve a commitment to give grounds and a belief in their adequacy.
At OC 486, Wittgenstein points out that neither knowledge-claims nor belief claims are appropriate to the extent that one cannot imagine the matter at hand being reasonably questioned, to the extent that one cannot conjure up a context in which giving grounds is meaningful. I do in fact know my name, and I know I am writing in English; both are also things that I believe. But an utterance of either kind demands a very special context. After a spell of amnesia, I may exclaim with relief, ‘Now, at last, I know my name’.

Wittgenstein is particularly concerned to dispel the notion that knowledge and belief mark different attitudes or mental states:

It would thus be possible to speak of a mental state of conviction, and that may be the same whether it is knowledge or false belief. To think that different states must correspond to the words ‘believe’ and ‘know’ would be as if one believed that different people had to correspond to the word ‘I’ and the name ‘Ludwig’, because the concepts are different. (OC 42)

The concept of knowing is therefore simply that of holding oneself out as being capable of saying how one knows and giving compelling reasons; the concept of believing involves no such commitment. Believing may involve the possibility of giving reasons without any confidence that others will be persuaded by them, any confidence that they amount to proof, or the possibility of not being able to give reasons at all (groundless belief).

If someone believes something, we needn’t always be able to answer the question ‘why he believes it’; but if he knows something, then the question ‘how does he know?’ must be capable of being answered. (OC 550)

At OC 175, Wittgenstein says, ‘I know it’ I say to someone else; and here there is a justification. But there is none for my belief’. This is overstated; it would be to say that ‘I know it’ commits me to a justification, whereas there may or may not be a justification forthcoming for my statement of belief.

This difference between claims to know and claims to believe does not account fully for the difference between knowledge and belief, in particular retrospective attributions of knowledge and belief. One who claims to know p and gives reasons may or may not succeed in establishing p. If it turns out that she is wrong – either in the sense that p is false or in the sense that she did not have good grounds for thinking that p was true, we will conclude that she did not know p but only believed it. And we may well persuade her to agree. When we consider
knowledge and belief, therefore, the distinction turns in part on what turns out to be true and not entirely on the convictions of the claimant or her ability to give grounds.

Consider three more points about knowledge, belief, knowing claims, and belief claims. First, believing \( p \) is ordinarily a condition of knowing \( p \). At OC 177, Wittgenstein says, ‘What I know, I believe’. In other words, the things I claim to know are the subclass of the things I believe for which I am prepared to give grounds. But this is not the same as saying that I believe I know the things that I do know. I may well know things (such as the structure of DNA) without realizing that I know them, and I may have skills that I have forgotten I have (‘I thought I’d forgotten how to play that Mozart sonata’). I may thus have false beliefs about what I know.

Second, one is likely to be mislead if one claims to believe \( p \) when in fact one knows \( p \). Others may be misled into thinking that one cannot give compelling grounds for \( p \) when in fact one can. Giving alibi evidence, the witness who can clear the defendant by demonstrating that he was nowhere near the crime scene (‘I know that he was in Montreal and not Los Angeles on the night in question because …’) would give suspiciously faint support by saying simply (but truly), ‘I believe he was in Montreal’.

Third, many propositions that cannot be the object of knowledge-claims cannot, for similar reasons, be the object of belief claims. Just as I need to imagine a special context for such claims as ‘I know that my name is T.M.’ (see OC 328, 470, 491, 515, 576 and 660) ‘I know there are physical objects’ (see OC 35, 36 and 57), or ‘I know that is my right hand’ (see OC 268, 369, 370, 371, 372 and 374) to make sense, the same can be said (for the same reasons) about ‘I believe my name is T.M.’ and so on. These claims do not allude to knowledge because, barring special circumstances, they are not the sorts of things for which I can be called to give grounds. These matters are more certain than any grounds I can possibly give. Similarly, I cannot speak meaningfully of believing these matters unless I can speak meaningfully of disbelieving them. In all these cases, my sureness and my beliefs about these matters are conditions of my making any judgements at all. Wittgenstein alludes to the status and role of these propositions in the following passages:

That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (OC 341)

But it isn’t that the situation is like this: We just can’t investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content
with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC 343)

My life consists in my being content to accept many things. (OC 344)

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC 204)

If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false. (OC 205)

These remarks, which refer to matters that cannot for the most part (in most contexts) be the object of knowing claims or belief claims are not, as one might imagine, static or frozen. To say that I cannot easily imagine doubting my name or the discontinuous transfer of bodies in an instant from one location to a different one, in the manner of Star Trek, is not to say that I cannot have recalcitrant experiences that may lead me to revise, even radically, my sense of the main contexts of my life. I may anticipate that future experience will confirm rather than impeach my certainties about the world and experience, but that expectation hardly guarantees anything. In several passages Wittgenstein recognizes these possibilities, and these passages show he is hardly a conservative with regard to the unchangeable nature of the ‘hinges’ of our judgements.

My ‘mental state’, the ‘knowing’, gives me no guarantee of what will happen. But it consists in this, that I should not understand where a doubt could get a foothold nor where a further test was possible. (OC 356)

One might also put this question: ‘If you know that that is your foot, – do you also know, or do you only believe, that no future experience will seem to contradict your knowledge?’ (That is, that nothing will seem to you yourself to do so.) (OC 364)

If someone replied: ‘I also know that it will never seem to me as if anything contradicted that knowledge’, – what could we gather from that, except that he himself had no doubt that it would never happen? (OC 365)

7. Analytic overview

Wittgenstein implies that there are propositions, ones that he sometimes refers to as ‘methodological’ (OC 318), that can never (or hardly ever, as discussed below) be the object of knowledge-claims. Examples
are: ‘There are physical objects’ and ‘Objects continue in existence when unperceived’. They are not empirical propositions at all and not testable in any context. He concludes that it never makes sense to make them the subject of knowledge-claims. It never makes sense, that is, to claim to be able to offer grounds for such propositions.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Wittgenstein considers only two categories of propositions, methodological propositions (or ‘rules’ as he sometimes calls them) and propositions that can be the appropriate objects of knowledge-claims in some determinable contexts. His suggestive examples sort themselves into at least four categories. Wittgenstein himself does not distinguish with absolute consistency among them.

The first category, methodological propositions, are such that there is no context in which I can gather evidence for them and no context in which I can imagine contrary evidence. How can I find evidence that objects exist unobserved when every attempt to gather evidence counts as an observation? Wittgenstein seems to have such propositions in mind when he says: ‘What counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic. It belongs to the description of the language-game’ (OC 82) and ‘If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false’ (OC 205). He concludes that ‘I know there are physical objects’ and ‘I know that objects generally continue in existence unperceived’ is nonsense.

Wittgenstein does not distinguish carefully between this first category and a second category, those propositions which one hardly ever has occasion to make the object of a knowledge-claim, empirical propositions for which contexts of doubt and proof are rare to the point of invisibility. Unlike methodological propositions, these propositions refer to matters than can be investigated and corroborated. Barring very special circumstances, I cannot doubt whether my name is T.M. or whether I have two hands without throwing into doubt my general ability to make judgements, but I can nonetheless check the documents in my wallet to see what name they bear and I can look down my torso and examine my appendages. It is therefore hardly nonsense to regard myself as knowing my name and knowing I have two hands, although I will hardly ever have to make such knowledge-claims. Rather, Wittgenstein notes that my conduct will show that I know my name, and so on.

In general Wittgenstein does not discriminate consistently between the first and second category, and many of his observations seem to
allude to both categories indifferently. For example, he says:

I should like to say: ‘If I am wrong about this, I have no guarantee that anything I say is true.’ But others won’t say that about me, nor will I say it about other people. (OC 69)

The truth of my statements is the test of my understanding of these statements. (OC 80)

The truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference. (OC 83)

It may be for example that all enquiry on our part is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated. They lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry. (OC 88)

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (OC 94)

The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules. (OC 95)

These observations and many others in On Certainty seem to refer both to the first category: propositions that have no evidence for or against them and that seemingly can never be the object of knowing claims (‘I know there are physical objects’); and to the second: propositions for which there is overwhelming evidence, ones that we would rarely have occasion to make the object of knowing claims (‘I know I have never been to the moon, and I know the moon is not made of Gorgonzola’). It is possible (as discussed in notes 4 and 13 below) that the distinction between the two categories cannot be maintained. It may be the case that every so-called methodological proposition can, with sufficient creativity, be given a context in which it can be examined and grounded. (Wittgenstein sometimes suggests that claiming to know the methodological propositions, or having doubts about such matters, can easily be a symptom of mental disease [OC 71, 73].)

A third category of propositions refers matters that in no sense are part of our picture of the world in an un revisable way. We can easily imagine circumstances that would lead us to question them, but those circumstances would be unexpected and highly unusual. An example might be the conviction that the title stamped on a book corresponds
to its contents. Another might be that drivers in the United States drive on the right-hand side of the road. We can imagine gross mistakes by publishers that would put in question the first conviction, and new laws that would change the second. In neither case would the experience be a matter of ‘the facts bucking’ in such a way that we would question our sanity or suspend making judgments at all. This would hardly be like discovering that one had indeed been to the moon but simply forgotten about it. Nonetheless, the opportunity for claiming that one knows book titles correspond to what’s inside or that one knows one drives on the right in the U.S. are rare. Our lives, as Wittgenstein points out, show such knowledge more readily than we ever have occasion to say.

The fourth and final category includes those matters that come up for discussion and controversy often in our language-games, matters that the most familiar language-games are designed to address and consider. Examples are endless. The biographer claims: ‘I know that (my subject) was a fetishist’; the historian claims, ‘I know that village life in fifteenth-century France was less close-knit than generally believed’; and the psychologist claims: ‘I know Smith suffered a recurrence of her paranoid delusions last Monday’. Discussions of such claims, including the presentation of evidence, the giving of grounds, appropriately follow.

One may take away two strictures from this analysis. First, Wittgenstein backhandedly addresses the question of what is knowledge. On one hand, knowledge does include many things that we generally have no occasion to assert but, things that our conduct shows we know, things for which, when push comes to shove, we can give corroborating grounds or evidence (‘My name is T.M.’, ‘I have two hands’). On the other hand, knowledge does not involve those matters that are purely ‘methodological’, purely rules by which we think and live, or that cannot be grounded by further interpersonal presentations of evidence or reasons. Examples of these disparate matters are ‘There are physical objects’ on the one hand and ‘I am in pain’ on the other. (We have already seen that this distinction is elusive, both in Wittgenstein’s text and in reality. In the text, Wittgenstein sometimes suggests and sometimes denies that every proposition can have the chameleon quality of being rule-in-some-contexts-but-not-others. In reality, it is hard to imagine a proposition that serves as a rule in every possible context.)

A second stricture concerns the role of knowledge-claims rather than the scope of knowledge. Whatever our conduct may show about our knowledge, claiming to know occurs meaningfully and clearly only in special contexts, those in which participants share concerns and criteria of relevance, contexts in which the point of the utterance is apparent
and in which the appropriateness of asking for and giving grounds is mutually understood.

Part B: Wittgenstein’s response to Moore

1. Moore and scepticism

Throughout *On Certainty* Wittgenstein refers to G.E. Moore’s views on knowing and knowing claims. Moore serves as a stimulus and foil for Wittgenstein’s own thoughts. Much of *On Certainty* cannot be understood except in the light of Moore’s purposes and arguments and Wittgenstein’s misgivings about some of those arguments.

In his essay, ‘Proof of an External World’, Moore challenges sceptical idealism, the view that one must but cannot justify references to an external or real world of objects. That view, which has a substantial philosophical pedigree, maintains that we cannot know the existence even of familiar objects such as our hands or the tree in our yard because in any (and therefore every) case we may be deluded. Any grounds for thinking we are not deluded can similarly be impeached with the hypothesis that we are, in turn, deluded about those grounds.

Moore concedes that we cannot prove we are not deluded, but he attempts to sever that issue from his proof that there are external objects. His point is disarmingly and suspiciously simple. He claims that we can prove there are external objects if we begin with a premise that is certain and derive the existence of external objects from it:

I can say: ‘I held up two hands above this desk not very long ago; therefore two hands existed not very long ago; therefore at least two external objects existed at some time in the past. Q.E.D’. This is a perfectly good proof, provided I know what is asserted in the premise. But I do know that I held up two hands above this desk not very long ago. As a matter of fact, in this case you all know it too. There’s no doubt whatever that I did. Therefore I have given a perfectly conclusive proof that external objects have existed in the past. (1939, 146)

At this point, Moore distinguishes between saying he has conclusive reasons for saying he knows (or for being certain) that external objects exist and saying that he is able to give a *proof* of his premise. He concludes that the sceptic’s error is in assuming that I can claim knowledge only if I can offer a proof, that there is no such thing as conclusive evidence in the absence of a proof.

Before examining Wittgenstein’s response, it is important to clarify how much Moore and Wittgenstein agree. Consider the following
Haven't I gone wrong and isn't Moore perfectly right? Haven't I made the elementary mistake of confusing one's thoughts with one's knowledge? Of course I do not think to myself 'The earth already existed for some time before my birth', but do I know it any the less? Don't I show that I know it by always drawing its consequences? (OC 397)

But what about this: 'If I were to tell someone that that was a tree, that wouldn't be just surmise.' Isn't this what Moore was trying to say? (OC 424)

Moore seems indeed to be concerned with just those matters that Wittgenstein also says we know but almost never have occasion to claim to know, matters that our behaviour shows we know. When Moore says we have evidence, indeed conclusive evidence, for the conviction that we have two hands or that we are awake, he also stresses that we do not need particular evidence for these convictions and that they are generally as certain as such things can be. In all these ways, Moore's thinking seems congruent with Wittgenstein's.

Why then does Wittgenstein say at OC 521, 'Moore's mistake lies in this – countering the assertion that one cannot know that, by saying "I do know it"'? He gives a clue at OC 91, where he scrutinizes Moore's claim that he knows that the earth existed for some time before his birth:

If Moore says he knows the earth existed etc., most of us will grant him that it has existed all that time, and also believe him when he says he is convinced of it. But has he also got the right ground for his conviction? For if not, then after all he doesn't know (Russell). (OC 91)

He adds at OC 151: 'Moore does not know what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our method of doubt and enquiry.'

Wittgenstein distinguishes between the stairway example (OC 398: 'don't I know there is no stairway in this house going six floors deep into the earth?') and the example of the long-term existence of the earth. Only the former is an instance of knowing. While a request for grounds, for demonstrative evidence, is unlikely to come up, one can imagine offering such a demonstration ('Come, let me show you, if you don't believe me'). The latter cannot, on the other hand, be a subject for corroboration.

A genuine case of knowing involves both general and special qualifications. I am only generally qualified to say that the earth existed, etc., in
the sense that I and others participate in a way of life and way of thinking for which that is a basic presupposition. With regard to the non-existent stairway or the nature of my name, I have special qualifications; others are not situated to give the same evidence and make the same associations as I am. I may for that reason be called to give grounds. Moore’s mistake, then, is to say that one knows things that are in fact matters of general qualification. Wittgenstein says: ‘the truths which Moore says he knows are such as, roughly speaking, all of us know, if he knows them’ (OC 100). He also says, in the same vein:

If ‘I know etc.’ is conceived as a grammatical proposition, of course the ‘I’ cannot be important. And it properly means ‘There is no such thing as doubt in this case’ or ‘The expression “I do not know” makes no sense in this case’. And of course if follows from this that ‘I know’ makes no sense either. (OC 58)

Thus, ‘I know \( p \)’ expresses a special qualification, a special relationship between the speaker and the fact that can be unpacked through the giving of grounds: ‘In a court of law the mere assurance “I know …” on the part of a witness would convince no one. It must be shown that he was in a position to know’ (OC 441).

Wittgenstein’s criticism of Moore’s claims about knowledge of the external world is that the matters he uses as examples are instances of general and not special qualification. Therefore one cannot be said to know them. ‘We just do not see how very specialized the use of “I know” is’ (OC 11). A person is less and less likely to be thought of as knowing \( p \) (and less likely to think of herself as knowing \( p \)) to the extent that \( p \) is such that one cannot imagine how others could believe the contrary (see OC 93).

At OC 407, Wittgenstein writes: ‘when Moore says “I know that that’s …” I want to reply “you don’t know anything” – and yet I would not say that to anyone who was speaking without philosophical intention’. The philosophical intention here is the intention to refute scepticism. How does this matter? There are obviously unusual but intelligible contexts in which ‘I know that that’s my hand’ or ‘I know I have two hands’ has a perfectly straightforward use. Ben has a serious accident in which his hand is severed. A hand found at the scene is brought to the hospital and, before the hand is reattached, Ben is asked to identify it, which he does by looking for a small mole near the thumb (‘I know that that’s my hand’). After surgery, I may phone Ben in his hospital room. Still groggy, he looks at his limbs to see whether the surgery was apparently successful; gratified, he notes to himself and reassures me: ‘I know I have two hands’.

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His claims make sense as (non-philosophical) knowing claims insofar as ‘it is possible for him to make sure’ (OC 23). Knowing assertions are ones for which one can ask, ‘How do you know?’ Claims make sense when and only when one can ‘add how one knows’ (OC 40):

It’s not a matter of Moore’s knowing that there’s a hand there, but rather we should not understand him if he were to say ‘Of course I may be wrong about this’. We should ask ‘What is it like to make such a mistake as that?’ – e.g. what’s it like to discover that it was a mistake? (OC 32)

To the extent that sceptics claim that we can indeed be making mistakes about such matters, OC 32 is Wittgenstein’s own refutation of scepticism.14 Wittgenstein is fundamentally in sympathy, as I read him, with Moore’s critique of scepticism. Moore’s mistake is in meeting the sceptic on his own ground, in responding to the sceptic’s ‘You don’t know the things you think you know’ with ‘I do know these things after all’. For Wittgenstein, the references to knowledge are altogether misleading. Moore’s claims are of the form, ‘I am generally qualified to engage in this practice because I can follow the rules’. This state of conviction, according to Wittgenstein, is ‘wrongly expressed by the words “I know” ’ (OC 414). It is entirely appropriate to say, however, that I act ‘with a certainty that knows no doubt’ (OC 360) in the face of transparent challenges offered by the sceptic. I cannot, in other words, inhabit the sceptic’s hypotheses or imagine my general qualifications to engage in thought and action to become special qualifications in need of grounding. Inevitably, ‘I shall act with a certainty that knows no doubt’.

Notes

1. Donald Kalish distinguishes semantics from pragmatics by pointing out that the latter field of study emphasizes the ways in which ‘philosophically interesting portions of ordinary language have resisted any natural translation into classical formalisms’ (1972, 356). Wittgenstein is clearly concerned with aspects of language that in fact seem to elude the formalisms of traditional semantics.

2. In Wittgenstein’s discussions of meaning, the term is always used in the sense of meaning as meaningfulness-in-context. Over and over again, he is scornful of the assumption that a term can retain meaning, unmodified and un-nuanced, across linguistic contexts.

3. Wittgenstein seems to think that some propositions are invariably methodological propositions or ‘rules’, propositions that identify the ‘hinges’ on which the rest of our discourse turns. In no context can these forms of words convey information or be uttered meaningfully. Perhaps such a claim would
be rash. Even ‘There are physical objects’ may be given a practical use. Suppose astronauts are investigating a gaseous mass in space and discover that within the mass there are discrete solid asteroids. They might convey that information by saying that ‘there are physical objects here’. Wittgenstein sometimes confuses the claim that some propositions cannot be meaningful with the claim that, if these propositions are ever meaningful, it is when they are used in non-philosophical contexts. ‘There are physical objects’ cannot be used to prove the existence of an external world. (See my discussion in Part B of this chapter.)

4. To say that ‘I know …’ logically entails that I can give grounds, does not mean that I will proceed to give grounds that others will accept or understand; it does not necessarily anticipate a productive dialogue. Thus my grounds for saying ‘I know Smith is in town’ may be that I just saw him; others may disbelieve me. Or I may say: ‘I know that this mysterious substance is the following carbon compound …’ and realize that my discussants lack the knowledge of chemistry to understand my reasoning.

5. See note 4. The judgement of others may trump mine when they and I are on at least an equal footing to evaluate the reasons. That will not be so in the kinds of examples described in the previous note where the reasons I give refer to my personal experience or depend on my special skills.

6. Everything that is said here about knowing propositions can also be said about knowing *how* (to do ...) and knowing *what* (something is).

7. What would count as giving grounds for the claim, ‘I know we’ve met before’? One can easily construct a dialogue that does involve the exploration of grounds: ‘You had a moustache then, didn’t you?’ or ‘I think it was in Cleveland in the middle 80s, wasn’t it?’ But, Wittgenstein’s strictures notwithstanding, ‘I know we’ve met before’ is often merely a way of insisting ‘I don’t just have a faint impression; I feel sure’ even when grounds are not forthcoming.

8. As suggested in note 7, ‘I know …’ may in such cases serve only the function of insistence.

9. Wittgenstein’s reflections on pain, here and in *Philosophical Investigations*, may reflect neither ordinary linguistic use nor medical realities. One may well say, ‘I know I’m in pain’ to insist that the feeling is not imaginary, that there is a somatic condition underlying the feeling. We all have had the sensation of pains, headaches for example, seeming to go away when we are not thinking about them – and we might insist that the pain at hand is real and not ephemeral. Also, doctors may know their patients are in pain, reading those facts from brain scans and other available grounds. In that context, ‘I know Smith is in pain’ has an appropriate use.

10. In other words, “‘I know p’ is true only if p is true” is both logical and atemporal. The temporal dimension enters when one realizes that in the future one may discover that p is not true and therefore that one never ‘knew’ p. The logical relationship cannot guarantee anything about what one may discover in the future.

11. See, for example, OC 98 and 309.

12. Cf. note 3. It is probably the case that with sufficient imagination we can devise a context in which any such utterance makes sense. I may well be uncertain about my name after a blow to my head and consequent
grogginess or amnesia, and perhaps someone who has lived undercover with many aliases may forget her name as well. Alternatively, someone who was adopted may use ‘I know my name’ to mark the discovery, after arduous research, of her birth name.

13. The history of scepticism is as venerable as the history of philosophy. Scepticism is distinguished by the attitude of questioning the reliability of knowledge-claims made by other philosophers and/or by ordinary persons. Scepticism about the external world is one of the more resilient kinds of scepticism.

10
Wittgenstein’s On Certainty and Contemporary Anti-scepticism
Duncan Pritchard

1. Contemporary anti-scepticism

Epistemology has seen a quite dramatic resurgence in recent years, and to a large extent this general renewal of interest in epistemological questions has been driven by the more specific renaissance in the epistemological sub-topic of philosophical scepticism.¹ If one thinks of the main epistemological proposals that are currently ‘live’ in the contemporary literature one usually finds that these accounts gained their initial impetus from their application to the sceptical problem. The obvious examples in this respect are, of course, the ‘sensitivity-based’ theories of knowledge first advocated by Fred Dretske (1970) and Robert Nozick (1981), the ‘semantic contextualism’ put forward by Keith DeRose (1995), David Lewis (1996) and Stewart Cohen (e.g., 2000), and the ‘safety-based’ theories of knowledge advanced by, amongst others, Ernest Sosa (1999) and myself (e.g., Pritchard 2002c). In each case, the chief attraction of the view is that it is able to offer a relatively compelling resolution of the sceptical problem, where that problem is understood, in essence, in terms of the incompatibility of the following three claims, each of which is plausible when taken on its own:

S1. We are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses.
S2. If we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, then we are also unable to know any one of the ‘everyday’ propositions which we typically take ourselves to know.
S3. We are able to know everyday propositions.

The first claim is intuitive because sceptical hypotheses – such as the hypothesis that one might undetectably be a brain-in-a-vat (BIV) who is
being ‘fed’ her deceptive experiences of everyday life by futuristic neuroscientists – are defined in such a way that it seems that we could not possibly know them to be false. After all, if there is nothing phenomenologically available to us that could indicate that we are not BIVs, then how could we possibly know that this scenario has not obtained?

The second claim is intuitive because it rests on the compelling principle that knowledge is ‘closed’ under known entailment, or the closure principle for short. This can be roughly expressed as follows:

**Closure for knowledge**

For all agents, \( \varphi, \psi \), if an agent knows a proposition \( \varphi \), and knows that \( \varphi \) entails a second proposition \( \psi \), then that agent also knows \( \psi \).

It is hard to see how such an apparently uncontentious principle could possibly be false. Moreover, when we plug in the propositions that are relevant to the sceptical argument to the closure-based inference, we find that the reasoning employed by the sceptic is extremely plausible. If I know that I am, say, sitting here now, then I surely must also know that I am not a BIV (since I know that BIVs don’t _sit_ anywhere). Accordingly, if I am unable to know the denial of the sceptical hypothesis that I am a BIV, then it follows that I am also unable to know the relevant everyday propositions that I know to be inconsistent with this hypothesis, such as that I am currently seated. Closure thus licenses S2.

With S2 in play, however, the sceptic is able to infer the denial of S3 from the further sceptical premise S1. Call this ‘the sceptical argument’. The problem is, of course, that we are unable to accept that the conclusion of the sceptical argument – that we are unable to know anything of substance – is true. Indeed, the suggestion that we are unable to know any everyday propositions is absurd – the _reductio ad absurdum_, if you like, of sceptical reasoning. In short, we can’t coherently reject S3.

It is important to highlight that the sceptical claim here is that we are _unable_ to know everyday propositions, rather than just the mundane contention that we do not, as it happens, know them. It is not at all counterintuitive to suppose that we might be the victims of a sceptical hypothesis, and to further note that if this were the case then we would not know very much. The force of the sceptical argument is due to its claim that _regardless_ of whether we are in fact the victim of a sceptical hypothesis, it remains that we do not know these everyday propositions – even if, as it happens, we are _not_ the victim of a sceptical hypothesis and the world is very much as we currently take it to be. It is this modal dimension to the conclusion of the sceptical argument that makes it so
troubling since it means that no matter what the actual world is like, we lack knowledge of much of what we take ourselves to know.

One further feature of the sceptical argument is also worth commenting on, which is that it is a paradox. That is, the three inconsistent claims noted above are all, taken independently, highly plausible and yet, taken collectively, they generate a contradiction. The question is thus which of these intuitive claims should go. This point about scepticism posing a paradox is important because it highlights the distinctive theoretical burden that faces the anti-sceptic. In short, the burden is this: it is not enough in responding to the sceptic that one simply motivates an impasse, with equal considerations on either side – a draw, if you will – because in terms of the sceptical debate a draw is as good as a loss. In order to see this, imagine for a moment that one responded to the sceptic as one would to a philosophical adversary who simply proposed an alternative position. Here it would be legitimate to do two things that one cannot legitimately do in the debate with the sceptic. The first is to charge one’s opponent with offering absurd claims. The second is to say that there is as much reason to hold one’s own position as there is to hold the adversary’s position, and thus that one’s adversary’s criticisms are inadequate to the task. In both cases such a manoeuvre when employed against the sceptical paradox would quickly backfire. In the first case this is because, as things stand, the sceptical paradox is only making use of conceptual resources that we have otherwise granted – the noted inconsistency is therefore an inconsistency that is present, it seems, in our own concepts, rather than merely in the claims of an imagined adversary. Charging the sceptic with absurdity is thus tantamount to charging ourselves with absurdity, and is thus an entirely impotent dialectical move. In the second case this is because if there is simply an impasse between the sceptic and the anti-sceptic then this seems in itself sufficient to motivate a second-order scepticism which concludes that there is no good reason not to be a sceptic, and this is just as troubling as its first-order counterpart.

One can highlight this point by considering a simple-minded response one might make to the sceptic – what we will tendentiously call a ‘Moorean’ response. Suppose one argued that since one’s intuition is that one knows lots of everyday propositions – in line with S3 – and that since one also has the further intuition that closure is correct – in line with S2 – it follows that the way to deal with the sceptical problem is to simply deny that we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses – that is, deny S1. That is, the claim would go, we have at least as good a reason as the sceptic to use closure in this direction rather
than use it in the other direction as undermining our everyday know-
ledge. Furthermore, one might add, it is the sceptic who is offering the
absurd position here, and so the burden of explanation ought to be, all
other things being equal, on her shoulders rather than ours. So while it
is puzzling to discover that we are able to know such anti-sceptical propo-
sitions as that we are not presently BIVs, nevertheless, it is at least less
puzzling to suppose this than that we might know next to nothing at all.

Clearly such an approach to scepticism will not get us very far. The
sceptic is, properly understood, not an adversary at all, but simply our
intellectual conscience who is highlighting the inconsistency of our beliefs
about knowledge. It is irrelevant, then, to learn that the sceptic is propos-
ing something absurd, since, as matters stand, it is we who are believing
absurd things. Moreover, if the only consideration that we can offer for
denying one of the inconsistent triad (S1–3), is that this enables us to
evade the sceptical problem, then this will give us little in the way of intel-
lectual comfort. After all, on this conception of the sceptical debate we
have just as much reason to accept the conclusion of the sceptical argu-
ment as we do to accept the conclusion of the Moorean argument, which
means that for all we have reason to believe, scepticism could well be true.
This is hardly an appealing intellectual position to be in.

The way to avoid offering such irrelevant responses to the sceptic is to
remember that there is, in fact, no such person as the sceptic, no actual
adversary that we are arguing with.2 If there were such a person, then it
would be relatively easy to expose their position to ridicule and send
them on their way. The ‘sceptic’ is instead our own intellectual creation,
the product of our discovery that our beliefs about knowledge are incon-
sistent in the way described above. It is not enough, then, to simply
remark that the sceptical conclusion is absurd and move on, or, relatedly,
simply deny one of the three claims listed above. What is needed, at the
very least, is some explanation of why this claim is false, and why, in par-
ticular, we might have thought that it was true in the first place.

I mentioned three types of anti-scepticism above which each
responded to the sceptical paradox as we have just outlined it, and it is
worth briefly noting (the details of each account aren’t important to us
here) how each of these anti-sceptical strategies responds to this problem.
The first, the sensitivity-based approach, deals with the problem by
motivating a modal theory of knowledge which is independently plau-
sible (i.e., it captures a number of our intuitions about knowledge) but
which has as a consequence the result that closure must fail. In essence,
they claim that a necessary condition for knowledge is that the agent’s
belief should match the truth in the nearest possible worlds in which
what is believed is false. Significantly, however, such a ‘tracking’ condition on knowledge appears to exclude knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses tout court, while leaving everyday knowledge untouched. Proponents of this view therefore deny S2 in the inconsistent triad.

The second view mentioned, the semantic contextualist thesis, responds to the sceptical paradox by claiming that ‘knows’ is an indexical term such that in different contexts of utterance the very same sentence employing this term can mean different things. In particular, contextualists of this ilk tend to claim that the sceptic is raising the epistemic standards by introducing sceptical hypotheses in such a way as to make their claim that we lack knowledge of everyday propositions true in this context. In contrast, however, they also claim that in everyday contexts in which sceptical hypotheses are not under consideration, our assertions of sentences involving the word ‘know’ which ascribe knowledge to agents will tend to express truths. The sceptical argument is thus correct relative to one context of assertion, but false relative to another. Moreover, since there is no single context in which both S1 and S3 are true, the contextualist is therefore in a position to claim that he can deal with the sceptical problem while retaining closure.

Finally, there is the safety-based approach which also retains closure. This strategy appears on the surface of things to be the same as the Moorean anti-sceptical approach that we just considered and discounted, in that it argues that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, and thus that S1 is false. What is different about this approach is that it combines such a view with a modal analysis of knowledge which can explain how we could come to know such propositions and which can also explain away our counter-intuitions here in terms of a misplaced epistemological internalism. Proponents of the safety-based view – or ‘neo-Mooreans’ as they are sometimes known – thus engage with the sceptical paradox in a way that the Moorean approach does not.

Our primary concern here is not with these particular anti-sceptical proposals, however, but rather with the question of how the remarks made by Wittgenstein in On Certainty bear on the contemporary response to the sceptical problem. On the face of it, the impact of On Certainty on the contemporary literature as regards scepticism is quite limited, in that there are only really two influential proposals in the epistemological literature that could be thought to be inspired by Wittgenstein’s remarks in this text. The theses that I have in mind here are the ‘inferential contextualism’ that is put forward by Michael Williams (principally in Williams 1991), and the ‘unearned warrant’ thesis defended by Crispin Wright (2000, 2002, 2003, 2004a, b; cf. Davies 1998,
2000, 2003, 2004), and it is these two views that I will be discussing here. There is a reason for this current lack of exposure, which is that the dominant research programme regarding the sceptical problem is a predominantly *epistemic* one, when what many commentators take the later Wittgenstein to be offering is a primarily *semantic* response to scepticism, one that takes issue with the very content of sceptical (and anti-sceptical) assertions.\(^3\) Wittgensteinian anti-scepticism is in fact alive and well, it is just that it doesn’t feature prominently in the current literature regarding scepticism because that literature is focused on primarily epistemic responses to the problem. The primary aim of this paper is to examine the prospects of the unorthodox *epistemological* reading of *On Certainty* made by Williams and Wright to see if there is any primarily epistemic response to the sceptic that can be extracted from this text. First, however, we need to say something about the Wittgensteinian notion which is central to both of these anti-sceptical theories – namely, ‘hinge’ propositions.

2. Wittgenstein on ‘hinge’ propositions:
the minimal reading

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein offers a sustained (though fragmentary) examination of a number of epistemological issues. Central to this examination is his conception of a certain type of proposition that performs a peculiar epistemic role. One of the ways in which Wittgenstein characterizes this sort of proposition is through the metaphor of the ‘hinge’:

> … the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.
>
> That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.
>
> But it isn’t that the situation is like this: We just *can’t* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC 341–3)\(^4\)

As this quotation indicates, what is odd about these propositions is that, unlike other seemingly empirical propositions, our belief in them does not seem to either stand in need of evidential buttress or, for that matter, be legitimately prone to coherent doubt. And this property is not explained merely by the fact that these propositions are *‘in deed not doubted’*, since the situation is rather that we do not doubt them
because, in some sense, we ought not to doubt them. Even despite their lack of sufficient evidential support, their immunity to coherent doubt is part of ‘the logic of our scientific investigations’.

In proposing this notion Wittgenstein was explicitly challenging the conventional epistemological wisdom that a belief is only legitimately held if it is sufficiently evidentially grounded (otherwise it is open to legitimate doubt), and that no belief in an empirical proposition is beyond coherent doubt should the grounds for that belief be found wanting. In particular, Wittgenstein’s remarks here were primarily targeted at G.E. Moore’s (1925, 1939) famous ‘common-sense’ response to the sceptic, so it is worthwhile beginning our commentary there.5

The response to scepticism put forward by Moore is ‘Moorean’ in the manner specified above at least in that it is in this vein that Moore claimed that, contra the sceptic, he knew certain propositions that were typically thought to be open to sceptical doubt. In particular, Moore famously ‘proved’ the existence of the external world (and thus the denial of any sceptical hypothesis designed to show that there was no such world), by simply gesturing with his one hand and saying ‘Here is one hand’, and then gesturing with the other and saying ‘And here is another’. Since, he claimed, he had established that he knew that he had two hands – and thus that two ‘external’ objects existed – so he had thereby established that he knew there was an external world as well. Moore regarded this as being a perfectly ‘rigorous’ proof, reminding us that

... we all of us do constantly take proofs of this sort as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions – as finally settling certain questions, as to which we were previously in doubt. (1939, 147)

To illustrate this he gives the example of proving that there are at least three misprints on a page. To settle this question we simply look for one, then another, and then another. If this is an adequate ‘proof’ of the contested proposition in this context, then why should the gesturing of one’s hands be deficient in response to the sceptic? So Moore answers the sceptical challenge by straightforwardly affirming various contested propositions along with the empirical grounds he possesses which justify this belief. He also offers a further caveat: that, at the very least, the truth of these propositions is more certain than the soundness of any sceptical argument which is intended to counter our belief in them. So whereas the sceptic argues from doubt of a general anti-sceptical proposition, concerning, say, our relationship to the external world, to doubt of a class of everyday propositions which presuppose the truth of this anti-sceptical proposition, the ‘Moorean’ style of response is to argue
from a putative instance of knowledge of one of the contested everyday propositions to knowledge of the general anti-sceptical proposition.

One of the key components of Wittgenstein’s critique of this approach is the claim that in arguing in this way Moore has misdescribed our epistemic practice by treating a hinge proposition as if it were just straightforwardly empirical. Wittgenstein focuses upon Moore’s claim to know \( p \), ‘I have two hands’, in this respect. Moore says that he knows \( p \) and, furthermore, that his knowledge of this proposition is evidentially supported (he says that he can see that he has two hands and so forth). This initial contention that Moore makes is pivotal because once this knowledge-claim is secured, the anti-sceptical conclusion follows relatively unproblematically. If one does know that one has two hands (and knows that having hands entails that there is an external world), then, intuitively at least, one must know that there is an external world, or that one is not a (handless) BIV (cf. OC 1). Crucially, however, as Wittgenstein argues throughout *On Certainty*, one cannot properly claim to know a hinge proposition.

For instance, Wittgenstein argues that the evidential grounds that Moore adduces to support his claim to know \( p \) are entirely irrelevant. What makes \( p \) certain, and therefore exempt from doubt, is not the fact that it enjoys a high degree of evidential support,\(^6\) but rather that it performs a framework role in normal circumstances. It is because \( p \) performs this role that we are unwilling to let anything count against it, since whatever could count against it could be no more certain than \( p \) itself. It is thus mistaken to think, as Moore does, that our belief in \( p \) is evidentially grounded. As Wittgenstein stresses, if evidence is to be coherently thought of as counting as a ground for belief in a certain proposition, then that evidence must be regarded as being more certain than the belief itself. The trouble is, this is not possible in the case of a hinge proposition such as \( p \) because *nothing* is more certain than this proposition in normal circumstances. Here is Wittgenstein:

My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.

That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it. (OC 250)

Moore’s belief in \( p \) cannot be coherently thought of as grounded by the sight of his hands (as he alleges), since it is not plausible to think that he is more certain of his sight than he is of the existence of his hands. This is illustrated by the fact that if one were to seriously doubt something so certain as whether or not one had hands, then why should one trust the
evidence of one’s sight? If, in normal circumstances, the former is open to doubt, then so, surely, is the latter. As Wittgenstein puts it:

If a blind man were to ask me ‘Have you got two hands?’ I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don’t know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn’t I test my eyes by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? What is to be tested by what? (OC 125)

The problem is, in claiming to know a proposition one thereby implies that one can offer grounds that would support that claim – one implies, that is, that one is in a position to say how one knows – where supporting grounds are grounds that are more certain than the proposition claimed. But since hinge propositions are not evidentially grounded (since nothing is more certain than a hinge proposition), this can never be adequately done (OC 14ff., 23, 438, 441, 483–4, 550–1, 564, 574, 576). Imagine, for example, that one attempted to legitimate one’s claim to know $p$ by appealing to the evidence that one has for $p$; regarding what one sees and what one has been told in this respect and so forth. In what way is this explanation to serve any role if all the evidence adduced in support of $p$ is itself less secure than $p$? As Wittgenstein puts the matter:

One says ‘I know’ when one is ready to give compelling grounds. ‘I know’ relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming that he is convinced of it.

But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes. (OC 243)

Accordingly, Wittgenstein says that instead of saying that he knows a proposition like $p$, Moore should have more honestly claimed that such a proposition ‘stands fast for me’ (OC 116; cf. OC 253).\footnote{7} \footnote{8}

This does not mean, however, that Wittgenstein thought that Moore would be entitled to express doubt about such a proposition on the grounds that it lacks sufficient evidential support, for the very hinge role that this proposition plays ensures that any claim to doubt such a proposition would be equally incoherent. What, for example, could ground such a doubt? After all, whatever could serve as a ground for an expression of doubt in this respect must be more certain than the proposition doubted and yet, as we have seen, nothing is more certain than this proposition. Hinge propositions are thus exempt from epistemic evaluation of both a positive and a negative sort, since no
claim to know or doubt such a proposition could ever be properly made (e.g., OC 10).

In general, then, Wittgenstein argues for a radical revision of how we understand the structure of reasons and evidence, one that generates the immediate consequence that an assertion of a first-person knowledge-claim regarding a hinge proposition is always conversationally inappropriate. That is, our reasons do not, as it were, ‘go all the way down’ to the bedrock, since our practice of offering grounds for our beliefs, and for our doubts, presupposes a backdrop of hinge claims that are both groundless and yet also immune to doubt. Indeed, Wittgenstein is here inverting the classical foundationalist epistemological paradigm, since his claim is that the propositions that we hold the most certain are, of their nature, lacking in evidential support. The certain hinge ‘foundations’ for our knowledge are thus understood in such a way that they are not only not self-justifying (they are not self-evident etc.), but also not justified by anything else that the agent believes. Since an appropriate claim to know implies that one can offer relevant grounds in favour of that claim, however, it follows from this thesis about the structure of reasons and evidence that any claim to know such a necessarily groundless hinge proposition is, at the very least, improper. Crucially, however, this picture of the structure of reasons also means that any doubt of a hinge proposition will also be necessarily groundless. Accordingly, since any claim to doubt a proposition also requires sufficient grounds to support that claim, it follows that any asserted doubt of a hinge proposition will also be, at the very least, conversationally inappropriate. Hence, not only is the Moorean claim to know hinge propositions improper, so too is the sceptic’s claim to doubt such propositions.

As we will see in a moment, Wittgenstein actually says much more than this about hinge propositions in *On Certainty* than this brief sketch indicates, but the additional theses in this respect are controversial so we will stick to what he at least says in this text. Call this, then, the ‘minimal’ hinge proposition thesis in *On Certainty*. Any Wittgensteinian response to the scepticism which employs the notion of a hinge must be at least sensitive to the minimal reading of *On Certainty*.

So what are the stronger claims that Wittgenstein appears to want to motivate in *On Certainty*? To begin with, while the minimal interpretation only has Wittgenstein contending that claims to know (or doubt) hinge propositions are conversationally improper, there are a raft of remarks in *On Certainty* which suggest the much stronger thesis that such claims to know are more than just improper but also incoherent or even just plain meaningless. Wittgenstein notes, for example, that saying that one knows
a hinge proposition is not analogous to merely asserting something which, though true, is superfluous, but rather akin to someone saying ‘good morning’ in the middle of a conversation (OC 464; cf. OC 350). In short, it offends against the grammar of epistemological claims (OC 10, 111–12, 116, 151, 243, 347–50, 372, 414, 461, 468–9, 576).

Indeed, it is worth noting in this respect the oddity of the terminology of a hinge ‘proposition’. Even by the lights of the minimal interpretation hinge ‘propositions’ are, it seems, beliefs rather than propositions since the very same proposition can be at one time a hinge and at one time an empirical proposition. Moreover, if one takes the line that such assertions are meaningless then one may well be tempted to argue that for Wittgenstein hinge ‘propositions’ are not propositions at all. If one interprets the Wittgensteinian account of hinge ‘propositions’ more robustly than the minimal interpretation along these semantic lines, however, then it ceases to be obvious that On Certainty is offering an epistemological response to the sceptic. On this view both Moore and the sceptic try to say what simply cannot be said, and this accounts for the apparent incoherence of both sceptical and anti-sceptical assertions. Of course, this thesis will still have epistemological ramifications, since it will call into question any epistemology which, for example, treats sceptical doubt as being on a par with normal everyday doubt. Nevertheless, what is important for our purposes is that such an anti-sceptical strategy would be motivated on primarily semantic rather than epistemic grounds.

The anti-sceptical theses that are our concern here, however, try to respond to the sceptical problem in a way that is in keeping with the Wittgensteinian conception of hinges, at least in some broad sense, but in such a way that a primarily epistemological response to the sceptic is on offer. Accordingly, we will henceforth set aside the semantic reading of On Certainty just noted.

Clearly, any epistemological response to the sceptic will still need to extract a stronger thesis about hinges from On Certainty than the minimal thesis just described. There are three interrelated reasons for this. The first is that the minimal thesis tells us next to nothing about what the conditions for knowledge are, focusing instead on what the appropriate conditions are for claims to know (or claims to doubt). Unless one is willing to make some further assumptions about the nature of knowledge, there need be no essential connection between, on the one hand, the impropriety of sceptical claims to doubt and, on the other, anti-sceptical claims to know and the issue of whether or not we really do have the knowledge that the sceptic contests. That is, as matters stand, it could just be that we have the knowledge of hinges that
the sceptic contests, but just can’t properly claim it (or, conversely, it
could just be that we lack the knowledge that we think we have, as
the sceptic claims, but that we cannot properly express this doubt). The
same applies to the related minimal Wittgensteinian thesis about the
structure of reasons and evidence. It is only if one understands knowl-
edge along evidentialist lines that the lack of evidential support for
belief in these propositions would entail that one lacks knowledge of
them, and this extra thesis is not clearly a feature of *On Certainty*.

The second reason is that the minimal interpretation of *On Certainty*,
if understood as an anti-sceptical thesis, makes the mistake noted above
of treating the sceptic as an embodied adversary, someone who is
committed to making appropriate claims about their epistemic position
(and ours). Recall, however, that there is no sceptic in this sense, but
rather simply a sceptical paradox that needs responding to. It is thus
hardly surprising that sceptical assertions have an air of absurdity about
them, since such assertions simply reflect the putatively paradoxical
nature of our epistemic concepts. In short, that it is incoherent to make
sceptical assertions does not in itself entail that what is asserted by those
assertions is not true.

The third reason why we need more than the minimal interpretation
of *On Certainty* if we are to extract an epistemological anti-sceptical
thesis from the text is related to the second, and concerns the manner
in which the minimal interpretation seems to favour a sceptical reading
of our epistemic predicament over an anti-sceptical reading. After all, if
there is an immediate epistemological moral to be drawn from the
minimal interpretation’s claim that our practice of offering grounds
depends upon an acceptance of certain claims which are entirely
ungrounded it is surely one that is sympathetic to scepticism in that it
offers support to the sceptical contention that our ‘knowledge’ is, at
root, groundless, and so not bona fide knowledge at all. As Wittgenstein
puts it at one point, ‘[t]he difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of
our believing’ (OC 166).11

With these three points in mind, we will consider the two styles of
broadly Wittgensteinian (epistemic) anti-scepticism that are advanced
in the literature, beginning with the account offered by Wright.

3. Wright on unearned warrants

The most recent Wittgensteinian anti-sceptical line suggested by Wright
initially appeared as a side-thesis of his approach to the so-called
‘McKinsey’ paradox regarding the putative incompatibility of first-person
authority and semantic externalism.\textsuperscript{12} This paradox appears to show that first-person authority is inconsistent with semantic externalism in the sense that the two theses combined produce the implausible consequence that one is able to have \textit{a priori} knowledge of empirical facts about the world. We need not get into the details of this puzzle here,\textsuperscript{13} except to note that the paradox has essentially the same logical structure as the sceptical argument, in that one can use two apparently uncontroversial claims – about content externalism and first-person authority – to generate a conclusion that is extremely implausible. Indeed, the structural similarity is even stronger once one notes that the standard formulations of this locally sceptical argument also involves knowledge transferring across a known entailment (albeit specifically \textit{a priori} knowledge), thereby presupposing a variant on the closure principle for knowledge cited above.

Essentially, Wright’s response to this puzzle is to argue that while closure must not be rejected because of its clear intuitiveness, one can avoid the puzzle with closure intact by rejecting a sister principle that he labels ‘transmission’. The difference between the two principles is that while closure simply maintains that knowledge transfers across known entailments, transmission demands something stronger, namely that what grounds the agent’s knowledge of the antecedent proposition \textit{thereby} grounds the agent’s knowledge of the consequent proposition. What this means is that someone who gained the grounds which supports his knowledge of the antecedent proposition will, via transmission, thereby come to gain grounds which support his knowledge of the consequent proposition, and so learn something new in the process. This is different to closure in that closure does not demand that the agent’s knowledge of the antecedent proposition should have epistemic priority in this way. Accordingly, it allows that the agent’s knowledge of the consequent proposition could have been acquired \textit{prior} to the agent’s knowledge of the antecedent proposition.

Wright offers a number of different formulations of this principle, but the canonical account he offers of transmission is in terms of the related notion of ‘cogency’. In a recent paper he puts the point as follows:

A valid argument is one thing. A valid argument with warranted premises is a second. But a \textit{cogent} argument is yet a third: it is an argument, roughly, whereby someone could/should be moved to rational conviction of the truth of its conclusion – a case where it is possible to learn of the truth of a conclusion by getting warrant for the premises and then reasoning to it by the steps involved in the argument in
question. Thus a valid argument with warranted premises cannot be
cogent if the route to warrant for its premises goes – of necessity, or
under the particular constraints of a given epistemic context – via a
prior warrant for its conclusion. Such arguments, as we like to say,
‘beg the question’.

Say that a particular warrant, w, transmits across a valid argument just
in case the argument is cogent when w is the warrant for its premises.
(2003, 58)\textsuperscript{14}

The guiding thought here is that transmission is a more demanding
principle than closure, at least insofar as this last principle is understood
in terms of warrant rather than knowledge – that is, as the thesis that if
one is warranted in believing one proposition, and knows that this
entails a second proposition, then one is warranted in believing the sec-
ond proposition. The idea is that it could well be true that one could not
be warranted in believing the antecedent proposition without also being
warranted in believing the (known to be entailed) consequent proposi-
tion, without this meaning that what grounds the warrant for one’s
belief in the antecedent proposition could be such that, employing
those grounds alone coupled with the known entailment to the conse-
quent proposition, one could thereby come to have a warranted belief in
the consequent proposition. And what works for closure for warrant
ought to likewise work for the closure principle for knowledge, as for-
mulated above, on the grounds that knowledge entails warrant. Hence,
it ought to be likewise possible on this view that one could only know
the antecedent proposition provided one also knows the consequent
proposition, without this meaning that what grounds the knowledge of
the antecedent proposition could be such that these grounds alone in
concert with the known entailment to the consequent proposition
could enable one to thereby acquire knowledge of the consequent
proposition.

Indeed, as Wright points out, question-begging arguments are an
obvious case in point in this regard, in that such arguments – where
knowledge of the consequent is simply presupposed in the agent’s knowl-
edge of the antecedent – obviously must adhere to closure, but will not
thereby instantiate transmission. Consider the following question-

begging argument:

I know that God is responsible for creating and sustaining the universe.

I know that if God is responsible for creating and sustaining the
universe, then God exists.

Therefore, I know that God exists.
Here we have a question-begging argument, in that knowledge of the proposition embedded in the conclusion is simply presupposed in the agent’s knowledge of the proposition embedded in the first premise. Clearly, however, such an argument will conform to closure because if the agent does know the embedded proposition in the first premise then he can hardly be thought to fail to know the embedded proposition in the conclusion, at least given his knowledge of the relevant entailment. Crucially, however, this argument will not conform to transmission because the grounds the agent has for believing the embedded proposition in the first premise already presuppose knowledge of the embedded proposition in the conclusion, in the sense that if that agent was not already entitled to the claim that God exits, then he could hardly be entitled to believe the more specific claim that God is responsible for creating and sustaining the universe. Accordingly, what grounds the agent’s knowledge of the antecedent proposition could not be such that, in conjunction with his knowledge of the entailment, he could thereby come to have knowledge of the consequent proposition, since it is only if he already knows the consequent proposition that he can know the antecedent proposition in the first place. Moreover, in order for this to be an argument which would generate rational conviction in the conclusion, then it had better be an argument that conforms not only to closure in this way but also to transmission. No one who did not already believe in God’s existence would be persuaded to believe in the existence of a God on the basis of this argument.

The Wright line as regards the McKinsey paradox is thus to explore the possibility that what might be failing in such an argument is not closure but rather transmission, so that the premises of the relevant locally sceptical argument in fact do not provide argumentative support for the highly implausible conclusion after all, and thus that the theses of content externalism and first-person authority are off the hook (even though it is true that the antecedent proposition could only be known provided the contentious consequent proposition was also known).

Setting aside the issue of whether this approach can deal with the McKinsey paradox, it ought to be clear that such a strategy has application to the Moorean argument against scepticism that we considered above. What is wrong with such a strategy, on this view, has nothing to do with closure – this part of the reasoning is perfectly fine – it is rather that the argument is in the relevant sense question-begging. That is, one cannot offer support for the claim that one knows that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis on the basis of one’s grounds for believing \( p \) because those very grounds already assume that one is not the victim of
a sceptical hypothesis. That is, it is only on the assumption that one is not the victim of such a sceptical hypothesis that one’s grounds give any support to the thought that one has two hands – otherwise, they offer no support in this direction at all.

While the upshot of this reasoning as regards an assessment of the Moorean argument is in conformity with the minimal interpretation of Wittgenstein described above, as yet there is no obvious sense in which this reasoning has anything to do with the Wittgensteinian conception of hinges, much less that it has any anti-sceptical import. The connection to Wittgenstein, and to anti-scepticism, comes with the further suggestion that Wright makes that the moral to be drawn from this line of argument is that there are certain propositions which perform a ‘hinge’-style role in that one is entitled to believe them even though, at least in certain circumstances, one is unable to offer any evidence in favour of them. Moreover, the relevant propositions in question here are those propositions which express our anti-sceptical commitments – that we are not BIVs and so forth. While it is true that we cannot gain epistemic support for such propositions, as the failure of the Moorean argument illustrates, this is meant to be consistent with the idea, which is claimed to be found in On Certainty, that these propositions could nevertheless perform a hinge role such that we are entitled to believe them even in the absence of such grounds. What we have as regards these propositions is thus, as Wright (2004a) puts it, an ‘unearned warrant’.

Moore’s mistake is thus specifically to try to argue for his anti-scepticism, to attempt to offer grounds for his belief in anti-sceptical propositions in such a way that would induce rational commitment in those who are attending to his argument. What we must recognize instead is that we have an epistemic entitlement to these propositions that exists even despite the fact that we are unable to offer grounds in favour of them. That is, we are entitled to believe in hinge propositions – that is, for Wright, the denials of sceptical hypotheses – even despite their lack of epistemic support, and thus no supporting argument is needed to defend these beliefs. Closure is therefore not the culprit here, but rather transmission. If one knows the premises of the Moorean argument, then one knows the anti-sceptical conclusion, but that does not mean that the grounds one has for believing the premises are thereby grounds for believing the conclusion, and thus one cannot coherently argue for belief in the Moorean anti-sceptical conclusion on the basis of the grounds that one has for one’s everyday beliefs.

As a reading of On Certainty this is, on the face of it at least, somewhat odd. There are three reasons for this. The first is that for Wittgenstein
the paradigm case of a hinge proposition, if there is one to be found in the text at all, is surely Moore’s claim that he has two hands, \( p \), not a specifically anti-sceptical thesis, such as that one is not a BIV. Relatedly, second, there is a contextual element to Wittgenstein’s treatment of a proposition like \( p \) in that he grants that in some contexts it can be given adequate evidential support (it is just that in these cases an assertion of this proposition has no anti-sceptical implications whatsoever). And, finally, the third reason to be suspicious of this reading of *On Certainty* is that Wittgenstein’s primary claim is that we are unable to properly claim to know hinge propositions and, if this is thought to have any direct epistemological ramifications at all, then one would expect one of these ramifications to be that one cannot therefore have knowledge of hinge propositions. On the reading that Wright offers, in contrast, one can know hinge propositions – indeed, given that the view defines itself partly in terms of its retention of closure, one must know them, if one knows anything much – albeit only in some peculiar ‘unearned’ fashion.

Indeed, this last point relates to the general worry raised above about trying to extract a specifically epistemological anti-sceptical moral from *On Certainty*, in that if any epistemological moral is to be extracted then it would seem to be the sceptical one that, strictly speaking, we lack knowledge of most of what we think we know. The apparently Wittgensteinian claim that our epistemic practices are ultimately groundless because of their dependence on a commitment to hinge propositions is, perversely, converted on this view into the contention that we somehow have knowledge, in a non-standard way, of these hinge propositions after all even despite their ungrounded nature. That is, that we have some prior entitlement to belief in these propositions such that epistemic support is not needed for knowledge in this case.

The natural question to ask at this juncture, of course, is just what entitles us to extract this particular anti-sceptical conclusion from the text rather than the sceptical moral that the unavailability of grounds for these propositions means that we cannot know them and thus, given closure, that we cannot know very much else either. After all, the line of thought presumably cannot just be that to suppose that we are unable to have such an unearned entitlement to these hinges would lead us directly to scepticism, and hence that the supposition is legitimate, since this would clearly be to beg the question against the sceptic in the very way that was contentious in the Moorean response to scepticism. Unfortunately, this is just how the argument pans out in this respect, with the epistemic motivation boiling down to the claim that since we are
unable to acquire warrants for these propositions, and since, as the sceptic highlights, if we are not warranted in believing these propositions then most of our knowledge is in question, hence it ought to be acceptable to suppose that we are warranted in believing such propositions.

For example, in his most recent paper on this subject, Wright (2004a, 188) quotes the following passages from *On Certainty*:

> We check the story of Napoleon, but not whether all the reports about him are based on sense-deception, forgery and the like. For whenever we test anything, we are already presupposing something that is not tested. Now am I to say that the experiment which perhaps I make in order to test the truth of a proposition presupposes the truth of the proposition that the apparatus I believe I see is really there (and the like)? (OC 163)

One cannot make experiments if there are not some things that one does not doubt. But that does not mean that one takes certain presuppositions on trust. When I write a letter and post it, I take it for granted that it will arrive – I expect this.

If I make an experience I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts, but not *that*. If I do a calculation I believe, without any doubts, that the figures on the paper aren’t switching of their own accord, and I also trust my memory the whole time, and trust it without reservation. The certainty here is the same as that of never having been on the moon. (OC 337)

As we noted above, the natural epistemic moral to be drawn from these observations is a dispiriting one about the structure of reasons regarding the ‘groundlessness of our believing’ (OC 166). Wright, however, draws precisely the opposing moral:

> To take it that one has acquired a warrant for a particular proposition by the appropriate exercise of certain appropriate cognitive capacities – perception, introspection, memory, or intellection, for instance – always involves various kinds of presupposition. These presuppositions will include the proper functioning of the relevant capacities, the suitability of the occasion and the circumstances for their effective function, and indeed the integrity of the very concepts involved in the formation of the issue in question. I take Wittgenstein’s point in the quoted passages to be that this is essential: *one cannot but* take certain such things for granted. (2004a, 189)
And why is this not simply a sceptical conclusion to draw about the structure of reasons? Wright continues:

Since there is no such thing as a process of warrant for each of whose specific presuppositions warrant has already been earned, it should not be reckoned to be part of the proper concept of an acquired warrant that it somehow aspire to this – incoherent – ideal. (2004a, 190)

Later he continues that:

This line of reply concedes that the best sceptical arguments have something to teach us – that the limits of justification they bring out are genuine and essential – but then replies that, just for that reason, cognitive achievement must be reckoned to take place within such limits. The attempt to surpass them would result not in an increase in rigour or solidity but merely in cognitive paralysis. (2004a, 191)

Clearly, however, this is, at best, merely a pragmatic resolution of the sceptical paradox, since it simply notes that accepting the sceptical conclusion would lead us to absurdity and intellectual stasis and then argues on this basis that we must reject it and therefore accept the legitimacy of our ultimately groundless believing. That not believing in hinges would be intellectually self-subverting in this way is not, however, an epistemic reason for thinking that such beliefs are true, but merely a pragmatic consideration which counts in favour of our proceeding as if they are true. Non-scepticism is thus defended on the grounds that it is the practical alternative, but we knew that already. Despite the well-advertised claims to the contrary, then, this particular hinge proposition thesis presents us with no epistemic response to the sceptic at all.

Of course, this is not to deny that there is a respectable notion of entitlement available that may be put to use in this regard, only that Wright does not make use of it. After all, epistemological externalists have long made play with such a notion, arguing that agents can legitimately believe all manner of propositions in the absence of supporting reasons just so long as the agent’s belief is formed in the right kind of way, where this is defined externally in terms of, for example, the reliability of the belief-forming mechanism involved. There is nothing peculiar about such a warrant on the externalist view for the simple reason that on this picture there is not a direct correlation between possessing a warrant and possessing adequate reflectively accessible grounds as there is on the alternative internalist picture. Accordingly, an epistemological externalist could approach the minimal interpretation of On Certainty in a way that retains our knowledge of hinge propositions, but do so by treating
such knowledge as being of a purely externalist sort which does not stand in need of evidential or rational support. So why doesn’t Wright understand the unearned warrant we have for hinges in this way?

The short answer to this question is that Wright is an epistemic internalist, holding (e.g., Wright 2004, 210–11) that adequate reflectively accessible supporting grounds are essential to the possession of warrant or knowledge (at least as regards propositions which, like hinge propositions, are not ‘self-justifying’ in the way that foundational propositions are taken to be on the classical internalist picture – that is, by being self-evident, or incorrigible, and so forth). Straight away, then, one can see the prima facie puzzle here for Wright in terms of his acceptance of unearned warrants – warrants which one holds in the (in principle) absence of supporting reasons – because on the internalist view such ‘warrants’ cannot be bona fide at all. Nevertheless, Wright wants to get around this by saying that even though such warrants are in this sense unearned, there are still reflectively accessible grounds that can be cited in their favour – namely, that reflection reveals that the propositions in question are necessary presuppositions of any coherent inquiry and therefore may be believed in the absence of supporting grounds. This is, in a way, a kind of reflectively accessible supporting ground for the beliefs in question. Crucially, however, this is not an epistemic ground for belief, and thus, by the lights of a consistent epistemic internalism, such unearned ‘warrants’ are not really warrants at all. The distinction between transmission and closure therefore never gets a handle on this dispute, since once one goes down the internalist road to the extent that Wright does, the only natural conclusion to draw is that, strictly speaking, the sceptic is right after all. Knowledge is essentially to do with the possession of reflectively accessible reasons, and the structure of reasons is such that our believing is ultimately groundless. Wright’s anti-sceptical strategy, if understood consistently, therefore collapses into the very scepticism that it tries to avoid.

4. Williams on inferential contextualism

Given the foregoing discussion, one might think that the way to rescue Wright’s position is simply to reconfigure it along epistemically externalist lines. The problem with this strategy, however, is that there is hardly any textual support in On Certainty for such a view. Accordingly, it would be problematic to consider such an externalist ‘unearned warrant’ thesis to be a Wittgensteinian anti-sceptical position at all. Recall that Wittgenstein says very little about the possession conditions for knowledge, focusing instead on the propriety conditions for knowledge-claims. As regards the latter, he naturally considers the propriety conditions of such
claims in terms of the agent’s reflectively accessible grounds. If one is an
internalist, then one could see in these remarks an implicit internalism
about the possession conditions for knowledge. That is, the thought
might be that since one cannot properly claim to know hinge proposi-
tions, because one lacks appropriate reflectively accessible grounds for
holding them, hence it follows that one cannot know such propositions
either, because knowledge possession also requires adequate reflectively
accessible grounds. While it is not obvious that Wittgenstein wanted to
make the further move, there are passages that suggest that he might and
it would at least be a natural interpretation to offer.17 The opposing exter-
nalist interpretation of allowing knowledge possession even in the
absence of supporting grounds, such that there is no essential connection
between the propriety conditions for claims to know and the possession
conditions for knowledge, would, however, be an interpretative move too
far, since now it is far from obvious what such a view would have to do
with the remarks in On Certainty at all.18

The second Wittgenstein-inspired epistemic anti-sceptical thesis that
is prominent in the recent epistemological literature does, however,
in incorporate an externalist theory of knowledge. This is the inferential
contextualism put forward by Williams (1991). This view is an inferential
species of contextualism in the sense that it holds that what defines a
context is not, for example (as in the case of the semantic contextual-
ism considered in Section 1), the conversational context of the attrib-
uter of knowledge, but rather the inferential structure of the subject’s
context. More specifically, what determines a context is what (for the
subject) is tested relative to what, and thus what stands fast, epistemi-
cally, relative to what. The idea is that in each context there will be a set
of beliefs which will hold fast and therefore be immune to epistemic
evaluation in that context – the epistemic status of other beliefs will
then be testable relative to this fixed framework of hinge beliefs.
Crucially, however, Williams claims that in different contexts different
beliefs can play this hinge role, and this will be reflected in the shift in
inferential structure that occurs as one moves from one context to
another. That is, in one context, a belief might play a hinge role and
therefore be immune to epistemic evaluation, either positive or nega-
tive. It will therefore form part of the backdrop of certainty against
which the epistemic status of other beliefs in this context are tested. In
another context, however, that very same belief might not play this
hinge role and could therefore be epistemically evaluated relative to a
different set of hinge beliefs.

Williams makes two claims that are central to his view, and which dis-
tinguish his position from competitor contextualist theories. The first,
which we have just noted, is that the basic beliefs of a context – the hinges, or, as Williams (1991, 121–5) prefers to call them, the ‘methodological necessities’ – are held in the absence of supporting grounds, just as we saw Wittgenstein contending above. The second is even more radical, and this is the claim that there is no hierarchy of contexts, with different contexts being just that, different. This is in contrast to semantic contextualism, for example, because on this view sceptical contexts employ more demanding epistemic standards than everyday contexts, and are thus in this sense epistemically superior. For Williams, however, no such ‘ordering’ of contexts is possible, with the epistemic standards of each context being entirely independent of each other.

This last claim has some striking consequences because the epistemologist – and thus the sceptic – is usually understood as operating in a context which is, in the relevant sense, pure. That is, while we might have all manner of epistemic practices in ordinary life that employ various context-specific rules, in the context of epistemological reflection we are deemed to be able to discover what the underlying epistemic architecture is like once the practical limitations of everyday life are stripped away. For instance, if we are a traditional foundationalist, what we think we discover in the context of epistemological reflection is that it is only certain types of beliefs that can serve a foundational role – those that are ‘self-justifying’, as it were, in virtue of being incorrigible or self-evident for example – and that this fact holds across all contexts. It is this picture of epistemological theorizing that Williams wishes to reject by advancing a form of contextualism which holds that:

… the epistemic status of a given proposition is liable to shift with situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors: it is to hold that, independently of such influences, a proposition has no epistemic status whatsoever. (1991, 119)

Williams calls the thesis that there is a context-independent epistemic status that attaches itself to propositions in virtue of the kind of propositions that they are ‘epistemological realism’, and claims that such a thesis is false. His own contextualist view is a working out of what it means to deny that claim. ¹⁹

Williams holds that every context will treat certain beliefs as hinges, and thus claims that what defines a context is its hinges, since they in turn will determine inferential structure (they will be what stands fast relative to what is tested in that context). Indeed, Williams claims that one can never epistemically evaluate a hinge because in doing so one changes the context and therefore turns the hinge into an ordinary empirical
claim. If we were to question a hinge of an everyday context, for example, then we would leave the everyday context and enter a different context, such as a *sceptical* context of inquiry that does not take *these* claims for granted (though which will take other theoretical claims as given). Once these hinges are brought forward for epistemic evaluation and the context changes in order to make this possible, we then discover that our beliefs in these erstwhile ‘hinges’ are groundless and so become persuaded by scepticism. Accordingly, we are led into believing that we know next to nothing of what we thought we knew. Williams grants to the sceptic that it is true that in the sceptical context we do indeed know next to nothing, and thus that scepticism is in this sense correct. Nevertheless, argues Williams, that the sceptic can create a context in which we lack knowledge does not mean that we lack knowledge in *quotidian* contexts where our everyday hinge beliefs are not brought forward for epistemic evaluation. The crucial point here is that Williams claims that the sceptical context is just another context, one that has hinges of its own regarding the unquestioned assumption that there is a context-invariant epistemic architecture that can be discovered under the conditions of philosophical reflection. As Williams puts the matter:

The sceptic takes himself to have discovered, under the conditions of philosophical reflection, that knowledge of the world is impossible.

But in fact, the most he has discovered is that knowledge of the world is *impossible under the conditions of philosophical reflection*. (1991, 130)

That is, the sceptical context is now just one context amongst others, with no theoretical ascendancy over other contexts and with unquestioned hinges of its own. That it is true, relative to the hinges of the sceptical context (such as the assumption that there is a context-invariant epistemic structure that can be discerned via philosophical reflection), that we know very little, does not mean that in everyday contexts in which different hinges are in play we fail to know what we take ourselves to know, which is what the sceptic claims.

Like the semantic contextualists we considered in Section 1, then, Williams is able to retain closure. In everyday contexts agents are able to know the hinges that are presupposed in their inquiry, even though such knowledge is by its nature not evidentially grounded (this is the juncture at which Williams’s commitment to epistemological externalism is most transparent). Crucially, however, such knowledge must remain forever tacit because to bring such claims forth for evaluation is itself to enter a different epistemological context – that of traditional (i.e., non-contextualist) epistemology – and in this context different hinges are in
play. Moreover, relative to the inferential structure of the sceptical context the sceptical claim that we lack knowledge of these erstwhile ‘hinge’ beliefs, and thus of much else besides, is true. Williams therefore offers a proposal which allows that certain basic anti-sceptical propositions are unknowable in sceptical contexts (just as everyday propositions are unknowable in this context), but which also accepts closure in such a fashion that we are able to know these propositions, albeit only tacitly, in everyday contexts (along with everyday propositions). In line with closure, then, there is no single context in which the agent has everyday knowledge and yet lacks knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses. By retaining closure in this way, Williams is able to account for some of our mixed intuitions about scepticism – in particular, the fact that we seem to find the view absurd in everyday contexts and yet also find it strangely compelling in the context of epistemological reflection.

In order to see the workings of this thesis in more detail, consider the following example. Williams notes that one of the most incoherent elements of any denial of closure is that it appears to permit us to assert such incoherent conjunctions as ‘Napoleon was victorious at Austerlitz [... but I do …] not know that the Earth existed at that time’ (1991, 322). Williams evades this difficulty by arguing that in everyday contexts where our belief that the earth did not spring into existence five seconds ago (replete with the apparent traces of a distant ancestry) is tacit, we do know the anti-sceptical proposition that is embedded in the second half of this conjunction. In sceptical contexts, however – contexts in which this proposition ceases to be tacit because we bring it forth for epistemic evaluation – it is no longer known because we are now guided by the hinges of traditional epistemology and, by the lights of this sort of inquiry, argues Williams, we do know next to nothing. That this is so, however, does not mean that we do not know a great deal in everyday contexts, only that there is something amiss with the presuppositions of traditional epistemology. It is not as if, claims Williams, we are doing history in a more rigorous fashion when we consider the epistemic status of these presuppositional claims. Rather, we have simply ceased to be doing history altogether and have begun to undertake a whole new type of investigation that is purely epistemological. The moral is thus that knowledge, while practically non-existent in sceptical contexts, is secure in everyday contexts. Closure therefore holds with the false impression that it fails generated by an implicit equivocation that occurs when one considers the sceptical argument – that is, an equivocation between the everyday contexts in which quotidian and discourse-specific propositions are at issue against a backdrop of shared
hinge assumptions, and the sceptical context in which these shared assumptions (but not others) are themselves up for evaluation.  

It should be clear that even despite its commitment to epistemological externalism, Williams’s line on hinges is more plausible as a specifically Wittgensteinian epistemic anti-sceptical thesis than Wright’s. To begin with, Williams is true to the contextual element to Wittgenstein’s account of hinges – the idea that there are circumstances in which a proposition that in certain cases functions like a hinge might instead function like an empirical proposition. Relatedly, Williams is also able to accommodate the idea that in certain contexts quite mundane claims, such as Moore’s claim, $p$, may well function like hinges, unlike Wright’s view which only treated the denials of sceptical hypotheses as candidate hinge propositions. Finally, Williams’s view at least attempts to be sensitive to the underlying epistemic pessimism at the heart of *On Certainty*. After all, Williams grants, in a way that Wright doesn’t, the fact that there are some contexts in which the sceptical conclusion is true.

Nevertheless, there are features of the view which make it problematic, both as a potential reading of *On Certainty* and as an epistemic anti-sceptical thesis. The first is the fact that this position allows that we do know the hinges of a context, albeit in a tacit way. This is the element of the view that brings out the implicit externalism in play here since clearly such knowledge can have nothing to do with the reflectively accessible grounds possessed by the agent as it is a central part of the thesis that no such grounds could ever be possessed in favour of believing a hinge. The only explanation of the epistemic status of this belief – bar the pragmatic, and therefore non-epistemic account we saw Wright offering above – is to understand it along externalist lines, and this is indeed what Williams does, claiming that, properly understood, inferential contextualism is an essentially externalist thesis. Given the consideration raised above about the implausibility of allying Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty* with externalism, however, this immediately counts against treating this proposal as a plausible interpretation of this text. Nevertheless, one might think that while this element of the thesis is a consideration against thinking of the view as a good interpretation of *On Certainty*, it does enable Williams to offer a plausible anti-sceptical thesis since it evades the tension between internalism and scepticism that we saw hitting right to the core of Wright’s account. Incorporating an externalism of this form into the account raises problems of its own, however. After all, what Williams seems to be arguing is that one can know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses by the lights of an externalist theory of knowledge just so long as one is in a context in
which such anti-sceptical propositions are not at issue but merely presupposed. The problem, however, is that if we can make sense of the idea that we know these propositions at all, in any sense, then it seems unnecessary to further incorporate the additional inferential contextualist caveat. The sceptical claim, encapsulated in S1, was that we were unable to know these anti-sceptical propositions, and it is a component of Williams's view that this is false. Accordingly, this feature of the position alone will suffice to block the sceptical puzzle, independently of the further considerations regarding inferential contextualism. If one is willing to make this initial move, then, the natural question to ask is why don’t we just simply stop there? That is, why do we need to be inferential contextualists as well if we’ve managed to motivate an epistemic externalism that can resist S1?

Indeed, there is such a view which approaches scepticism in this baldly externalist way – namely, the neo-Moorean response to scepticism that we briefly outlined in Section 1 which simply offers an externalist explanation of how we might know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Of course, Williams can offer all sorts of further considerations that might swing the argument back in his favour, most notably that there is a diagnostic element to his view which accounts for our apparent sympathies with scepticism in certain contexts which is lacking on the neo-Moorean view. But the neo-Moorean proposal has a diagnostic story of its own regarding the pull towards internalist epistemic intuitions in reflective contexts, so such a defensive line is unlikely to impress, especially since Williams himself has signed up to the externalist critique of epistemic internalism.

There is also a second reason for scepticism about Williams's anti-scepticism, and that is the fact that his resolution of the sceptical problem – especially in contrast to the competing neo-Moorean proposal – has a distinctly ‘sceptical’ air about it. The neo-Moorean wants to argue that a thoroughgoing externalism shows that, providing one’s beliefs are formed in the right kind of way, we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses after all. Scepticism is therefore false, in all contexts. Williams, in contrast, wants to argue that while knowledge is not, as the sceptic claims, impossible, it is unstable, in that a mere shift in the context – even where all the usual epistemically relevant factors, such as informational state, remain context – can change the epistemic status of one’s belief and make one’s knowledge disappear. The anti-sceptical assurances we get from Williams are thus ambiguous, since the epistemic status of our beliefs is now not something that is rescued from the sceptic’s grasp tout court. Instead, a kind of deep epistemic insecurity is retained on
Williams’s view, one that reflects the fact that the knowledge that one has is always relative to a particular context. This is the sense in which Williams’s response to the sceptical problem is itself what we might call a sceptical solution, if indeed ‘solution’ is the right word here at all.

Finally, we need to note an oddity that lies at the heart of Williams’s position, which concerns his ambivalent attitude to the context of philosophical (epistemological) reflection, and thus to the context that the sceptic functions in. As we saw above, we have a natural tendency to regard this context as being one in which the underlying structure of the epistemic architecture can be discerned, and thus as being a context which has a theoretical ascendancy over non-reflective contexts. Williams wants to reject this epistemological realist claim, but the way that he rejects it is ambiguous. After all, Williams argues that the hinges of the sceptical context include the assumptions of epistemological realism, and thus that we should evaluate the claims of this context relative to that assumption. Given that the assumption in question is, he argues, a priori false, however, then this seems to imply that we are entitled to disregard the sceptical context altogether. That is, there seems to be a key difference here between the sceptical context and other non-sceptical contexts since in the latter case the hinges are simply those claims which are presupposed – and therefore lacking in evidential support – but not also claims which we have a priori grounds to think are false.

The problem is, of course, that elsewhere Williams wants to grant the sceptical context a certain internal legitimacy, in that the conclusions wrought in that context are true, but only relative to that context (recall the quotation cited above, where Williams (1991, 130) remarks that the sceptic ‘has discovered … that knowledge of the world is impossible under the conditions of philosophical reflection’). It is easy to see why Williams wants to make this move, since it is only with the sceptical context accorded an internal legitimacy in this way that he can claim to be capturing our intuition that the sceptical conclusion has a prima facie plausibility when considered in the light of philosophical reflection and therefore offer the diagnostic element of his view that is so central to the position as a whole. Moreover, if Williams were to maintain that we have a priori knowledge of the falsity of the hinge assumptions of the sceptical context then he would be presenting an epistemic evaluation wrought in a context of philosophical reflection (if not the same context of philosophical reflection as that in which scepticism functions) which, it seems, has application across all contexts. If this is right, then on this interpretation there is an internal contradiction that lies right at the heart of Williams’s view.
There is thus a dilemma facing Williams here. Either the sceptical context is legitimate, in which case the hinge assumption of epistemological realism cannot be \textit{a priori} false. If this is true, however, then we do not get the inferential contextualist picture that Williams outlines. Alternatively, Williams might opt to claim that the sceptical context is illegitimate, in which case there is no context in which scepticism is true, but then we do not get the contextualist diagnostic story that Williams wants to tell, and thus there seems little reason to prefer his contextualist thesis over its neo-Moorean rival. Moreover, since this is an epistemic evaluation that applies across all contexts, contrary to Williams’s own inferential contextualism, then we seem to have good reason for thinking that such a view is not sustainable anyway.

5. Concluding remarks: the state of contemporary anti-scepticism

Like Wright’s view, then, the hinge-based, and primarily epistemic, anti-sceptical thesis offered by Williams is, ultimately, neither a particularly plausible interpretation of \textit{On Certainty} nor a compelling resolution of the sceptical problem. In the case of Wright the overarching difficulty was making sense of this anti-sceptical thesis in epistemic, rather than just simply pragmatic, terms. This problem reflected the underlying awkwardness of trying to motivate an epistemologically internalist response to the sceptic which denied the key sceptical premise that we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Wright’s conception of hinge propositions also seemed to have very little in common with the view that Wittgenstein sets out in \textit{On Certainty}.

Williams’s position fared better, both as an anti-sceptical thesis which was genuinely epistemic, and as an account of hinges that bore more than a passing similarity to that described in \textit{On Certainty}. Nevertheless, this too was unpersuasive on closer inspection, since it seemed to be troubled by an internal inconsistency that hit right to the heart of the view. Removing that inconsistency meant either (1) completely undermining the view – by dropping the core claim that epistemological realism should be rejected, or (2) leaving the claim in a position little different to the neo-Moorean response to scepticism, which has next to nothing to do with \textit{On Certainty}’s remarks on hinges. Either way, the position is no longer an attractive alternative.

This doesn’t mean, of course, that there is no plausible specifically epistemic anti-sceptical thesis to be extracted from \textit{On Certainty}, since there may be further epistemic interpretations that avoid the pitfalls described
here. Nevertheless, I think it does indicate that a certain pessimism is in order in this regard, in that if one is looking for a primarily epistemic response to scepticism from Wittgenstein’s remarks in this text then one is likely to be disappointed. At best, it seems, all that Wittgenstein offers in this regard is the kind of pragmatic defence of our belief in hinges that Wright was trying to pass off as being a genuinely epistemic approach to the problem. It thus appears that if there is to be a plausible anti-sceptical thesis inspired by *On Certainty* then that thesis had better be understood along primarily semantic, rather than epistemic, lines.

Before closing, I want to briefly outline what ramifications our discussion of *On Certainty* has for the three main anti-sceptical theses in the contemporary literature that we outlined in Section 1. For what does seem to be a clear consequence of this discussion is that each of these proposals has a rather limited conception of what the ultimate focus of the sceptical attack is. Consider first those arguments for non-closure that try to maintain that the sceptical problem arises from making our everyday knowledge dependent upon knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses. As our commentary on *On Certainty* has illustrated, such views simply emphasize the fundamental problem here, which is the apparent groundlessness of our believing. By the lights of this anti-sceptical position, our everyday knowledge, and thus the reflectively accessible grounds which support that knowledge, is somehow meant to be secure even despite our inability to know, and thus have sufficient reflectively accessible grounds for believing, the denials of sceptical hypotheses. The problem is to understand how this could possibly be a response to the sceptical problem, as opposed to being simply a recognition of what the sceptical problem ultimately consists in – namely, the claim that our everyday ‘knowledge’ is in fact entirely groundless.

Of course, one might object here that the arguments for non-closure are focused on *knowledge* and make no mention of the agent’s reflectively accessible grounds – his evidence, reasons and so forth. Accordingly, since there are theories of knowledge which try to avoid there being any essential connection between knowledge possession and the possession of adequate supporting (and reflectively accessible) grounds, so closure for knowledge could fail without this having any immediate ramifications for the structure of evidence or reasons. Perhaps, then, one could separate out the issue of whether closure for knowledge holds from the related issue of whether a parallel principle for grounds holds (i.e., a principle which maintains that if one has adequate reflectively accessible grounds for believing one proposition, and one knows that this
entails a second proposition, then one has adequate reflectively accessible grounds for believing that second proposition also).

Such a move would face a dilemma, however, and, moreover, the nature of this dilemma highlights just what is problematic about the other two anti-sceptical strategies that we looked at in Section 1 – namely, semantic contextualism and neo-Mooreanism. Let us suppose that there is a plausible theory of knowledge available that does not understand knowledge as essentially requiring the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds. Such a theory of knowledge would, of course, be an externalist theory. Now, it is certainly true that on this view one could deny closure without saying anything about whether the grounds one has in favour of one’s belief in a proposition are also grounds in favour of believing a second known to be entailed proposition. That is, closure for knowledge could fail without this meaning that the analogue closure principle for supporting grounds should, ipso facto, also fail. The crucial question, however, is what would such a distinction gain one in terms of the sceptical debate? After all, the parallel sceptical problem in terms of the groundlessness of our believing remains – all that has been achieved is to separate this problem from the knowledge-based argument that we started with. Indeed, if anything, on this conception of the sceptical debate it seems that it is the grounds-based sceptical argument that is the most pressing, since the only knowledge that is being rescued from the sceptic in the case of the other argument is knowledge that lacks supporting grounds, and this is hardly a desirable intellectual position to be in. That is, the dialectical position now is one of maintaining that, contra the sceptic, one can have the knowledge one takes oneself to have after all, while also conceding that, just as the sceptic claimed all along, one can never have adequate supporting grounds for such knowledge. Accordingly, even if one does have most of the knowledge that one takes oneself to have, this will not mean that one actually has any reason for thinking that this knowledge is possessed.

With this in mind the dilemma facing the proponent of non-closure should be clear. The first horn of the dilemma involves understanding knowledge in such a way that it does not require the possession of reflectively accessible grounds, thereby enabling the proponent of non-closure for knowledge to retain closure for grounds. The problem with this proposal is that the resolution of the knowledge-based argument on offer now seems somewhat muted given that it only succeeds by devaluing the concept of knowledge involved by leaving a further sceptical argument regarding the structure of grounds untouched. That is, proponents of non-closure for knowledge on this view seem to be in the unpalatable
situation of acknowledging that while they might well know a great deal, they can never have adequate reflectively accessible reasons for thinking that such knowledge is possessed. This is externalism indeed.

Unfortunately, the other horn of the dilemma is little more appealing. On this alternative, proponents of non-closure for knowledge understand knowledge in such a way that there is an essential connection between knowledge and the possession of reflectively accessible grounds, and thereby further motivate an argument for the rejection of closure for grounds. The problem with this strategy is that while it might seem (at a push) understandable that one’s knowledge of everyday propositions could coexist with a lack of knowledge in the denials of sceptical hypotheses, it is not at all intuitive to suppose that one could genuinely have grounds for believing one proposition, know that this entails a second proposition, and yet fail to have grounds for believing the second proposition, and this is what defenders of this strategy will have to argue. Indeed, it is difficult to see why this should be thought to be an anti-sceptical thesis. After all, on this view our grounds rest on what is groundless, and this is, it seems, a thesis that is congenial to scepticism, rather than hostile to it. So either the strategy is revealed to be offering an extremely weak response to the problem of scepticism (indeed, not really confronting scepticism in its strongest form at all), or else it offers no real response to scepticism. Either way, the arguments for non-closure for knowledge fail to get a grip on the sceptical puzzle.

With this dilemma in mind, it is easy to see that semantic contextualism and neo-Mooreanism will fare little better as anti-sceptical theses. In each case closure is retained, and this is achieved by allowing that agents can indeed know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Since there is no internalist construal of knowledge available which could account for this, these proposals are essentially allied to an externalist epistemology. The upshot of these views is that – at least in everyday conversational contexts – agents can have knowledge of everyday propositions where this knowledge presupposes further anti-sceptical knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses, albeit where this latter knowledge is purely externalist in character (and so is not supported by adequate reflectively accessible grounds). The problem with this anti-sceptical line, however, resides in how it completely fails to confront the parallel sceptical problem regarding the structure of grounds. For all either of these views tell otherwise, it remains true that our beliefs in everyday propositions are groundless and, indeed, the point about everyday knowledge resting on purely externalist anti-sceptical knowledge simply emphasises this fact. That is, like the arguments for
non-closure, we are left in a position in which knowledge is, it is claimed, rescued from the sceptic even though, for all we have been told to the contrary, it remains that the agent has no adequate reflectively accessible grounds available which could indicate that such knowledge is possessed. Again, then, what we have here are anti-sceptical proposals that completely fail to confront the core sceptical problem about the structure of our grounds.\textsuperscript{24}

So while \textit{On Certainty} might not contain within it a compelling response to the sceptic that is cast along primarily epistemological lines – which is hardly surprising given that the guiding anti-sceptical thought in this work seems to be semantic rather than epistemic – a primarily epistemological reading of Wittgenstein’s remarks on scepticism does contain within it a critique of the very direction of argument of the main anti-sceptical theses in the literature today. The reason for this is that the epistemic focus of this work, such as it is, is on the issue of the structure of reasons and evidence rather than on the possession of knowledge \textit{simpliciter}, and it is here that the core epistemological problem of scepticism resides.\textsuperscript{25}

Notes

1. For a survey of the recent literature on scepticism, see Pritchard (2002b).
3. Perhaps the most famous exponent of a line of this sort is Cavell (1979), but see also McGinn (1989; cf. Conant 2002; McGinn 2002) and Travis (1989), who takes a rather radical Wittgensteinian line in this respect.
4. Although the ‘hinge’ metaphor is the dominant symbolism in the book, it is accompanied by various other metaphors such as the following: that these propositions constitute the ‘scaffolding’ of our thoughts (OC 211); that they form the ‘foundations of our language-games’ (cf. OC 401–3); and also that they represent the implicit ‘world-picture’ from within which we inquire, the ‘inherited background against which [we] distinguish between true and false’ (OC 94–5).
5. At least if we take those remarks at face value. It has been suggested (e.g., Stroll 1994, chapter 1), that the focus of Wittgenstein’s notes in this regard was actually on a reading of Moore that was put to him by Malcolm (1949; cf. Malcolm 1952, 1977a). Another thinker whose writings had a significant impact on \textit{On Certainty} was Newman (1844, 1985), whose influence pervades the text (although he is only actually explicitly mentioned by Wittgenstein once – OC 1). For discussion of Newman’s work in this regard, see Kenny (1992) and Pritchard (2000). In what follows I will be understanding Moore as being the focus of the book, and interpreting Moore’s stance as regards scepticism in the way that Wittgenstein did – I will therefore be setting aside the issue of what the true philosophical stimulus for \textit{On Certainty} is, or whether Wittgenstein did interpret Moore’s remarks correctly.
6. Some commentators, such as Stroll (1994, 47–8), do take Wittgenstein to be suggesting that certain propositions are hinges due to their high level of evidential support. Stroll seems to be misled by certain locutions that Wittgenstein employs, especially the phrase ‘everything speaks for it, and nothing against it’ (e.g., OC 190–1). As Wittgenstein is keen to point out, however, this does not indicate an evidential support at all, but rather a kind of agreement that this proposition should not be doubted (e.g., OC 163–6, 203, 214–15).

7. In a related fashion, Wittgenstein argues that just as one cannot say how one knows a hinge proposition, so one cannot say how one might go about convincing someone of the truth of a hinge proposition either. For instance, how does one persuade someone who, in normal circumstances, doubts whether or not he has two hands? (Imagine, for example, that he concedes that he, and everyone else around him for that matter, seems to see his hands). And if we did convince him, how could we account for this? (OC 257, 428). If, in normal circumstances, he does not believe a proposition like \( p \), then it seems that no amount of empirical evidence (which will, perforce, be less certain than the hinge itself) will, or could, satisfy him. Indeed, Wittgenstein argues that although we can imagine a situation wherein someone acted out his doubt of a hinge proposition, we could make no sense of such a person (we could not regard this person as rational). The doubt would be regarded as a sign of insanity, misunderstanding, or as being merely rhetorical (perhaps as a joke – OC 463).

8. In a related vein, Wittgenstein argues that one can only properly claim first-person knowledge when that claim has the potential to be informative, and this condition is clearly not met in the case of a hinge proposition. Moore only knows \( p \) (if he does) provided that (mutatis mutandis) everyone else does as well. Accordingly, Moore’s use of the caveat ‘I know …’ is at best misleading since it generates the implicature that Moore has some special access to the epistemic buttress of the embedded proposition that others lack. One way in which Wittgenstein develops this thought is via the contention that the ‘I’ in ‘I know that \( p \)’ is superfluous (OC 58, 587–8). The qualification implies a set of relations both to knowledge and a person such that it purportedly adds something extra to the content of the expression \( p \). But if the certainty accorded to these propositions is common to everyone (at least in normal circumstances) then there is no sense to the idea that Moore has some special knowledge which is unavailable to others, or that he possesses information which he, but not others, has acquired (OC 84, 100, 401, 462, 466). To support this contention Wittgenstein points out that ‘I know’ only has a meaning when it is uttered by a person (it would be meaningless if, say, a sign at a zoo claimed that ‘I know this is a zebra’ (OC 588)). And since it is indifferent to the epistemic content of \( p \) whether or not it is preceded by the claim ‘I know’, so the use of the first-person pronoun is at best misleading.

9. Wittgenstein remarks, for example, that there are special circumstances in which one can properly assert \( p \), but that in these circumstances \( p \) does not have any special epistemic status and so such an assertion has no obvious anti-sceptical import (OC 23, 347, 349, 387, 412, 483–4, 526, 596, 622). An example of such an abnormal circumstance would be where someone has just stumbled out of the debris of an explosion without any feeling of his hands.
In such cases, $p$ fails to perform a hinge role since in these abnormal cases $p$ would no longer be accorded the degree of certainty that is typically reserved for it. As a result, one could properly claim knowledge of such a proposition on evidential grounds (one could, for instance, coherently use one’s sight in order to check to see that one’s hands are still intact). Crucially, however, Moore’s claim to know $p$ is not made in such an abnormal circumstance, for if it were then it would be odd that he should take such a belief to offer sufficient grounds to support his belief in the existence of an external world. Moore is thus caught in a bind. Either his belief in $p$ is completely certain as he claims, in which case $p$ is a hinge proposition and so not a candidate for the requisite epistemic evaluation; or $p$ is a candidate for an epistemic evaluation, in which case it lacks the special property of being a hinge proposition which is treated as absolutely certain. Either way, a claim to know $p$ has no anti-sceptical ramifications whatsoever.

10. An excellent case is made for this interpretation in Moyal-Sharrock (2004a), and I will not rehearse these arguments here.

11. There are other issues which complicate any epistemological anti-sceptical thesis based on Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, such as the strikingly different approach he takes to propositions such as ‘There is an external world’ than he does to propositions like ‘I have two hands’, though it would take us too far afield from the present discussion if he tried to explore all of these issues in detail here. For more on this point, see Williams (2004a).

12. Though for a qualification to this claim, see note 14 below.

13. For an overview of the recent debate in this regard, see Nuccetelli (2003).

14. The distinction between closure and transmission – at least as regards closure for warrant – was first made in earlier work by Wright (1985), though this was not the only anti-sceptical idea involving hinge propositions that appeared in this paper, and the application of this thought to the McKinsey paradox did not come until later. A very different anti-sceptical proposal regarding hinge propositions in that paper – perhaps the more dominant anti-sceptical proposal of the paper in fact – was that we should regard certain propositions which encapsulate anti-sceptical claims (such as that there is an external world) as non-factual. Wright motivated this primarily semantic anti-sceptical proposal on broadly semantic anti-realist grounds which he saw as being supported by some of Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty* and elsewhere. The idea of disentangling the thesis regarding the distinction between closure and transmission and the non-factuality thesis, while it was clearly present in Wright’s lectures that I attended at the University of St Andrews in the mid-1990s, did not appear in print until Davies (1998), though it was here being specifically applied to the McKinsey paradox (hence my previous assertion that this particular hinge-based anti-sceptical proposal was a ‘side-thesis’ of the McKinsey debate). For recent discussion of Davies’ view, and its relation to Wright’s, see the papers by Brown, McKinsey, McLaughlin and Wright in Nuccetelli (2003).

It should be noted that in between this early paper on hinges and scepticism and the later work that we are currently considering, Wright put forward another anti-sceptical thesis that made use of hinge propositions, though one that, again, could be understood independently of the proposal currently under consideration. In this paper – Wright (1991) – he argued that doubt of
a certain sort was epistemically self-defeating because it involved doubt of a hinge proposition, and thus that sceptical arguments which employ certain kinds of sceptical hypotheses were incoherent (as he put it, such arguments ‘implode’). As I argue in Pritchard (2001b), however, this particular anti-sceptical strategy, while epistemic in the relevant sense, does not work.

15. I’ve argued in Pritchard (2002a) that it doesn’t.

16. I explore the prospects for an epistemically externalist reading of some of the key passages in On Certainty in Pritchard (2001a).

17. In a recent article, Ribeiro (2002) has claimed just this – that Wittgenstein was clearly proposing an austere internalist epistemology in On Certainty. For my own part, I think Ribeiro’s claim here is far too strong. In support of his view he repeatedly falls back on just three passages – (OC 14, 91, 243) – and in each case it is telling, I think, that the focus of the passage is on a claim to know rather than on knowledge itself.

18. That said, there are some remarks in On Certainty that might be thought to suggest (with a little interpretative license) a latent externalism, and such an approach might be interesting in its own right, regardless of whether we consider it a possible reading of the text. See Pritchard (2001a).

19. It is for this reason that I’ve argued elsewhere that the best way to understand Williams’s position is as a form of epistemic deflationism. See Pritchard (2004).

20. This is in contrast to those semantic contextualist accounts of knowledge that we considered in Section 1, since these positions incorporate a context-independent hierarchy of epistemic standards. On their view, a sceptic who participated in an historical context would be employing a more rigorous, rather than just a different, epistemic standard.

21. For some of the key critical texts on Williams’s contextualism, see Putnam (1998) and Ribeiro (2002); and also the exchanges between Stroud (1996a) and Williams (1996); between Rorty (1997), Vogel (1997) and Williams (1997); and between Fogelin (1999) and Williams (1999b). I critically contrast Williams’s inferential contextualism with semantic contextualism in Pritchard (2002d).

22. It is actually not essential here that the proponent of non-closure for both knowledge and grounds regard the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds to be essential to knowledge. After all, it could be that such grounds are not essential to all knowledge but only most of it, with the counterexamples to closure for knowledge residing in those cases where closure for grounds fails. Accordingly, a denial of closure for knowledge would go hand in hand with a denial of closure for grounds even though the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds is not a necessary condition for knowledge. Similarly, it is a logical possibility that the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds is a necessary condition for knowledge and yet closure for knowledge fails while closure for grounds does not. This eventuality would occur where what caused the failure of closure of knowledge related to one of the other necessary conditions for knowledge other than this condition. I focus on the possibility that one denies closure for grounds because the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds is necessary for knowledge in the text because I take it that this is the most obvious way in which a denial of closure for grounds would be motivated by one who denies closure for knowledge.
23. A complication in this respect is raised by Cohen’s semantic contextualism, which is meant to be understood as an internalist theory of knowledge. As Cohen admits, however, such a view is unstable at just this juncture since there is no respectable account of our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses that can be cast along internalist lines. The only possibility here is, it seems, to regard such knowledge as being in some way a priori, though this is a difficult position to maintain, especially given that the knowledge is of a contingent proposition and, moreover, of a contingent proposition that is very unlike other contingent propositions which might plausibly be thought to be candidates for a priori knowledge. Here is Cohen: ‘What should we conclude? Our options seem to be accepting contingent a priori knowledge or endorsing what looks to be objectionable reasoning. However we go then, there is a distasteful consequence. But then again skepticism is a distasteful consequence – and I would maintain more so than any consequence of a contextualist account.’ He continues, and here Cohen must surely be applauded for his intellectual honesty: ‘Which contextualist alternative is the best? I prefer the one that endorses a priori rationality, but that may be mostly a statement about which bullet I am most prepared to bite’ (Cohen 2000, 106). There is thus no comfortable way to reconcile epistemological internalism and attributer contextualism, even by the lights of a proponent of such a reconciliation.

24. As should be clear from this discussion, while I favour a neo-Moorean response to the specific sceptical argument that we began with that turns on the closure principle for knowledge, I do not hold, as others do, that this thesis suffices to resolve the sceptical puzzle as a whole on the grounds that this puzzle is, at root at any rate, specifically concerned with the structure of grounds rather than with the possession of knowledge. I explore this proposal in depth in Pritchard (forthcoming).

25. Thanks to Bill Brenner and Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, and to The Leverhulme Trust for the award of a Special Research Fellowship which has enabled me to conduct work in this area.
... why should the language-game rest on some kind of knowledge? (OC 477)

In his 1949–51 notes edited under the heading *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein engages the question of how to think about the foundations of human knowledge. This chapter shows the casual remarks on religion in *On Certainty* to be of systematic importance: Wittgenstein’s peculiar account of religion improves our understanding of epistemic certainty.

As is well known, Wittgenstein’s non-cognitivist epistemology does not rationalistically look for propositions that are supposed to be known ‘by (pure) reason’ or that are somehow declared to be evident. Wittgenstein also dismisses foundational candidates of traditional empiricism; that is, either propositions that are assumed to be beyond reasonable doubt due to their being related to excellent conditions of perception (e.g., protocol- or observation-sentences) or non-propositional instances of the immediately ‘given’, such as sense-data or physical objects. This chapter does not review the difficult reasons for this dismissal, but rather describes Wittgenstein’s own account of the foundations of human knowledge and competence. It will also attempt to show in which sense Wittgenstein aims at grounding ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’ in practices that are or were carried out by existing cultural communities: ’What has to be accepted, the given, is [...] forms of life’ (PI, p. 226). Section 1 outlines, as I understand it, the standard interpretation of Wittgenstein’s non-cognitivist treatment of the foundations of knowledge and rule-following. Sections 2–4 elucidate Wittgenstein’s conception of a religious stance towards the world and human life and, on this basis, Section 5 provides a new interpretation of epistemic certainty.
1. On the foundations of knowledge in epistemic practices

1.1

Epistemic practices are here understood as rule-governed ways of human (inter)action. They are distinctively characterized as ways of arguing, giving reasons, explaining, doubting or justifying. Since any assertion, technique or action may stand in need of an explanation or a justification, these explanations or justifications may also be called into question. It is therefore tempting to understand such sophisticated explanatory structures as ‘chain[s] of reasons’ (Z 301). This metaphor, however, oversimplifies matters, since explanations or justifications for particular items are often given in ‘network-like’ grounds and in a plurality of ways (cf. PI 478), which are more or less unstructured sets of propositions, hints and/or actions. Wittgenstein does however retain the chain-metaphor and insists, in several of his manuscripts, that explanations, justifications or doubts ‘come to an end somewhere’ (e.g., PG 97; PI 485 and p. 180; OC 204, 563). This ‘end’ is specified in the following remarks:

‘An empirical proposition can be tested’ (we say). But how? and through what? (OC 109)

What counts as its test? – ‘But is this an adequate test? And, if so, must it not be recognizable as such in logic?’ – As if giving grounds did not come to an end sometime. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting. (OC 110; my emphasis; cf. also OC 204)

Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to look at what happens as a ‘proto-phenomenon’. That is, where we ought to have said: this language-game is played. (PI 654; cf. RPP II 632 = Z 391)

Understanding these remarks is crucial to grasping Wittgenstein’s epistemological approach. To my mind, they contain at least the following theses, which are meant to be correct descriptions of those practices that we are acquainted with:

1. Any kind of knowledge or competency can be called in question; such a doubt may be dissolved by giving reasons;
2. The possibility of providing adequate reasons is accounted for in the ‘logic’ of a language-game or a practice;
3. The ‘chain of reasons (justifications, explanations, grounds)’ comes to an end that can be characterized by a peculiar status within the
‘logic’ of the respective practice; the end, however, does not consist in true propositions that are specifiable in cognitive terms;

4. The end is neither arbitrary nor grounded; it consists in existing ways of acting;

5. These ways of acting do not need any further grounds or justifications; we should rather accept the fact that people *indeed* act that way. Wittgenstein apparently expects that our proper understanding of these theses will amount to our agreeing to them (cf. PI 126–8). 3

1.2

In the light of the (language-)game-metaphor, human practices are here seen as rule-governed ways of acting and can therefore be described by listing their *constitutive rules*. Making a knowledge-claim by asserting something or claiming to be competent as regards a peculiar course of action by perhaps simply carrying out a specific action, is a way of acting that makes sense and is explainable as a ‘move in the game’ with respect to the constitutive rules of the very practice in question (OC 105). The set of constitutive rules (cf. OC 95, 319) that ‘defines’ (OC 497) or constitutes a practice may be called the ‘logic’ of that practice (OC 56, 82, 137, 628). If the practice is distinctly verbal, it may be called ‘language-game’ and its set of rules, its ‘grammar’ (PG, p. 88). Thus, ‘[f]ollowing according to the [constitutive] rule is FUNDAMENTAL to our language-game’ (RFM, p. 330).

That is to say: the ‘logic’ of a practice defines which actions, for example, assertions, are permissible. It furthermore constitutes and specifies the sense or meaning of the respective ‘moves’, and it defines which claims of ‘knowing how’ or ‘knowing that’ are possible in the respective epistemic practices. Additionally, the ‘logic’ of an epistemic practice P defines what counts in P as right, true or correct (OC 83, 205–6, 514), and it limits the ways these claims might be justified within P. The ‘logic’ thus defines how reasonable explanations or justifications would look like in P. The following schema helps explain this account further:

\[
P: [K_i \leftarrow K_{i-1} \leftarrow \ldots \leftarrow K_1] \leftarrow C
\]

According to the ‘logic’ of a practice P, a K_i is understood as a knowledge-claim of some sort that can be justified by (‘←’) another knowledge-claim, K_{i-1}. The range of the K_iS (in square brackets) is the range of what can ‘logically’ be known, justified or doubted in P, where the question or truth or correctness makes sense or where an error is ‘logically’ possible in P. The ‘chain of justifications’ comes to an end at the *certainty* C that belongs to the constitutive rules of practice P (OC 192).
Wittgenstein holds that ‘“[k]nowledge” [K] and “certainty” [C] belong to different categories’ (OC 308): quoting explicitly the constitutive rules of a ‘game’ hardly amounts to be a proper ‘move’ in the same game. For example, if Neil, a competent English-speaking member of twenty-first-century western culture, goes for a medical examination because of some odd pain in his hand, he may describe his pain as pounding, dull or sharp, and he may locate the pain in the bones, in the muscles or on the skin. Being unable to relate Neil’s descriptions to a medical sample, his physician may ask him to explain what he means by ‘sharp’ or ‘in the muscle’, and she may insist on further description and clarification. But if she asks Neil what he means by ‘a hand’ or ‘pain’, she will then be questioning his English speaking competence and/or his ability to identify pain. That is, she will have ‘switched to another game’, and the problem will have changed from attempting to find out the cause of Neil’s pain to testing whether or not Neil is able to communicate in English, or altogether.

Such a ‘switch’ is possible because one and the same proposition may belong to different categories with respect to the ‘logics’ of the respective different practices. Just as an architect’s blueprint of a house may first be of a normative kind showing how the house ought to be built, and then, once the house is finished, of a descriptive kind showing how the house is built, a proposition like ‘This is a hand’ can either be rated a constitutive rule, since it normatively prescribes how one should call the end part of the arm beyond the wrist in English – it is, so to speak, a constitutive semantic rule of English – or it can be looked at as a piece of information, since it may descriptively say something new in a peculiar situation (OC 87, 319, 401), for example, when people who are looking for birds and frogs in a swamp, find a hand belonging to a submerged corpse instead (cf. OC 2, 349, 353, 461). Wittgenstein therefore stresses that, depending on the ‘logics’ of the respective language-games, ‘the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a [constitutive] rule of testing’ (OC 98; cf. OC 213, 309, 401). As a constitutive rule, ‘This is a hand’ belongs to the presuppositions that need to be accepted (though not necessarily in a conscious manner) if one is to participate in language-games dealing with hands or other body parts. Neil therefore does not tell the physician: ‘(I know that:) This is a hand, and I know what pain feels like. (Now let me tell you:) There is pain in my hand’ (cf. OC 347). A proper piece of information merely consists in: ‘There is pain in my hand’ (OC 8).

Such a presupposed constitutive rule may be looked at as a certainty, since it is impossible and senseless to doubt it while one is engaged in the
(epistemic) practice which is regulated or constituted, among other things, by that very rule. And certainties C of a practice P are not themselves true, but express a norm: they constitutively define what counts as true or false within P (OC 83, 162, 200, 205–6). They establish the (back)ground against which the truth or correctness of genuine knowledge-claims $K_i$ gets measured in P, and they provide P’s ‘standards of rationality’ (OC 219–20, 323, 334, 556). Therefore, a constitutively defining, hence normative certainty C, cannot be false, cannot be doubted or justified, and error concerning C is impossible within P (OC 115, 120, 138, 155).

Certainties like ‘This is a hand’, ‘The earth is round’, or ‘The earth has existed for many million of years’ are taken for granted under normal circumstances and are usually not articulated. However, one cannot ban these propositions from all language-games (as Malcolm 1942 and 1949 suggested), since there are situations imaginable in which their utterance makes perfect sense (OC 461, 467) – not as certainties, but as descriptions or hypotheses. This shows that there is no strict distinction between normal and non-normal contexts, but a grading off from the normal to the extraordinary (perhaps ‘philosophical’) circumstances, as well as from normal and meaningful kinds of activity to senseless behaviour. A certainty is not to be discovered, but to be reconstructed in view of the way people (inter)act under circumstances they consider normal (OC 152, 248).

1.3
What counts as a constitutive rule and is therefore taken to be certain and indubitable in one epistemic practice can be questioned or endorsed in another. Thus, practices of a cultural community may confirm one another (OC 102, 288, 603). Wittgenstein suggests that we should accept this holistic structure in spite of the philosophical urge to look for a ‘deeper’ justification of the constitutive rules of epistemic practices: Don’t we call this ‘a hand’ because this is a hand? Or because calling this ‘a hand’ has proved useful? Or something similar? Wittgenstein envisages attempts of these kinds as pseudo-explanations, for, at best, they go in a circle (OC 139–42, 191). Again, I am not concerned here with showing why the attempted explanations turn out to be pseudo-explanations. Instead, I will focus on a discussion of how it is possible to follow practice-constituting rules like ‘This is a hand’.

One may think that, in order to be applied, any rule requires an interpretation by the person who aims to follow it. As there are no self-interpreting, self-applying, or self-explaining rules (PI 86, 211, 214; RFM, p. 331), another rule would be needed to guide the person in
interpreting and following the first correctly (OC 26), but this merely prompts an infinite regress (PI 198, 201; cf. OC 77). No doubt, there are rules that help interpret other rules which belong to complicated or elaborate practices demanding extensive teaching and explanation, for example, academic disciplines. This, however, cannot be the case with all constitutive rules, and particularly not with ‘truly’ fundamental constitutive rules, since interpretation must come to an end somewhere (PI 198, 201). Accordingly, it is the possibility of following constitutive rules of primitive practices that needs to be explained – without having to metaphysically invoke the postulate of self-applying rules or some other kind of Spinozistic causa sui.

That is why Wittgenstein insists on there being ‘a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation’ (PI 201). In order to understand his point, one needs to resist philosophizing in an ‘analytic’ manner, that is, in a manner that aims to first dissect wholes into their parts and then put these parts together again – for example: first dissecting language-games or practices into their rules, the interpretation of the rules, and the rule-following persons, and then trying to re-connect these ‘elements’. According to Wittgenstein, such an approach runs into a dead end, since the task of re-connecting these ‘elements’ will fail. Wittgenstein shows this by establishing the problem of rule-scepticism (PI 185). He asks for a justification of a particular way of correctly following a fundamental rule and at first sight appears to end up in the resignation that ‘no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule’ (PI 201). In other words: there is neither a fact of the matter nor of the mind that determines or justifies a specific rule-application. At best, we go in a circle. For instance, we cannot justify the constitutive rule ‘This is a hand’ by the fact that there is a hand, since in order to detect that there is a hand we already need to apply the rule ‘This is a hand’. That is, ‘the limit of language manifests itself in the impossibility of describing the fact that corresponds to … a sentence without simply repeating the sentence’ (CV 1998, 13; cf. OC 191).

In order to circumvent this theoretical predicament, Wittgenstein develops a ‘non-analytical’ account: He denies a ‘gulf’ (PI 431) between the mentioned ‘elements’, that is, he doubts the analytic separability of the person, the rule, its interpretation and its application and suggests to look at them as necessarily ‘hanging together’ as a whole within a practice:

… ‘obeying a [constitutive] rule’ is a practice. (PI 202)

Following a [constitutive] rule is a human activity. (RFM, p. 331)
Following according to the [constitutive] rule is FUNDAMENTAL to our language-game. (RFM, p. 330)

Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our [constitutive] rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself. (OC 139)

In other words, Wittgenstein postulates an ‘internal relation’ between the concepts of a person, a (constitutive) rule, a rule-interpretation, an action, a practice and finally even a community (PI 202, 241–2, 258). This means that there is no way of understanding or explaining one of these concepts without referring to or making use of the others; they mutually elucidate one another and thus all need to be accepted together. Hence, to grasp what a rule or a rule-interpretation is requires an understanding of what a communal practice, a rule-governed activity, or a person is (cf. OC 27, 34, 44–5, 61–2, 140, 212). To be a person is to be able to apply rules, that is, to be a possible competent participant of a practice whose correct application is, as a matter of fact, an object of community agreement (McDowell 1984). It comes as a package, and one might say: ‘the practice has to take care of itself’ (OC 139, 501).

What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life. (PI, p. 226)

We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by learning rules: we are taught judgments and their connexion with other judgments. A totality of judgments [together with the respective activities, that is the whole practice] is made plausible to us. (OC 140)

You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life. (OC 559)

According to Wittgenstein, the sheer facticity and irreducibility of the existing primitive (basic, fundamental or non-sophisticated) practices of a cultural community needs to be acknowledged – otherwise, one ends up in rule-scepticism, or in other philosophical predicaments. Mere knowledge of, or acquaintance with, the constitutive rules of a primitive practice will not do, since rules do not apply, explain or interpret themselves. This is intended to be a farewell both to rationalism, including Kantian transcendentalism, and to empiricism or materialism. For there is, because of the above-mentioned ‘internal relations’, no way of understanding what a primitive practice, a primitive action, a constitutive rule, a person or a community is in non-intentional, non-semantic,
or non-pragmatic terms that are supposed to explain or justify the possibility or correctness of a practice.

1.4

What people know or have a command of while participating in specific primitive practices has to be understood as a **mastery** that can only be specified by means of exactly those rules, actions or concepts that the participants in question are said to be masters of. It is because we know what a piece of information is, and pick out a specific type of body-part we call a hand that we can say Neil in the above described practice is describing pain in his hand when he utters: ‘There is pain in my hand.’ We have access to the meaning of activities only because we already have a command of those rules, actions or concepts that are embodied or expressed in those very activities. No description will succeed in fully specifying the meaning or sense of an action until it accounts for an identification of what participants of a particular practice do and what they mean to do. Such a description must include how these people conceive the situation they are in and what they believe they know (cf. Stroud 1996b, 316–17).

Consequently (and this is a hermeneutical truism), we are not able to state a complete and finite list of the constitutive rules of a practice. Since the rules are understandable only to those who are possible competent participants in the basic practices, we participants as well as we interpreters lack the distance required to gain a perspicuous view of them (PI 122). In less metaphorical terms, we are not equipped with a criterion guaranteeing the completeness of a list of practice-constituting rules. If we refer to constitutive rules of a specific practice, and perhaps even specify some of them explicitly, we will succeed in providing only sections of the ‘rulebook’, or of the practice’s ‘logic’. Moreover, we only understand these rules if we have, somehow, a command of the whole practice.

If this is the case, we also lack the distance to criticize or **justify** the primitive practices of our own cultural community. Rather, we have already accepted their facticity by our own **deeds**. There is no way of stepping from a culturally developed practice back into a ‘neutral’ practice or context, since a ‘neutral’ practice or context is not a practice or context at all. In other words: in the beginning of all our philosophizing we were already involved in practices of our form of life, including our investigative practices. This is a fact that we need to accept.

1.5

Wittgenstein finds this conclusion succinctly formulated in Goethe’s well-known phrase from *Faust*: ‘In the beginning was the deed’ (OC 402).
'The beginning’ is here understood both as the historical starting point as well as the systematic foundation (cf. CV 1998, 36). Established practices are what is ‘given’ when philosophical reflection starts and what it refers to. Fundamental words, concepts, convictions or actions cannot be justified, but only grasped in their respective practices.

In Goethe’s drama, Faust, the main character, the leading scientist/philosopher of his time, aims at a new translation of the famous opening phrase of the gospel according to John, and suggests the following options: ‘In the beginning was the word [...], the sense [...], the power [...], the deed!’ (Faust I, verses 1224–37). One might say that Faust’s suggestions mirror Wittgenstein’s own development in the philosophy of language: not the mere word is important, but its sense; but there is only sense if there is someone who has the power to utter the word meaningfully; and in order to utter a word meaningfully, a person has to act according to the rules that constitute that particular language-game. Hence, what is essential to the meaning of a word is the act of using it. In this sense, Wittgenstein coined the slogan: ‘Words are deeds’ (CV 1998, 53; cf. PI 546).

This also applies to our judging: There are no ‘deeper’ reasons for our epistemic certainties, but there is the facticity of our community’s practices, and ‘certain things are in deed not doubted’ (OC 342). – By referring to Goethe and the legend of Faust, Wittgenstein embeds his own philosophical approach into the religious and/or mythological tradition of his own cultural community.

1.6

Wittgenstein’s overall picture here is that humans are ‘born into’ a specific cultural tradition and are ‘trained’ to accept its peculiar practices, its standards of rationality, and its world-picture, which is the set of convictions and values a cultural community shares.6 These matters are already settled before philosophers, who themselves belong to specific forms of life, begin to reflect critically on them. This does not mean, of course, that we cannot change our practices, but that we can change them only piecemeal; that is, by changing or improving single practices, including their constitutive rules or their certainties. Entire forms of life cannot be changed all at once, since in order to change or improve anything, some things have to be retained: the certainties of the practices one is in during the change.7

1.7

Our cultural community – the western tradition of the twentieth and the early twenty-first century – is proud of its epistemic, especially
scientific and technological practices, perhaps not without right. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein’s philosophical clarifications in *Philosophical Investigations* and in *On Certainty* aim to show that even these practices are ‘not based on grounds’, at least not on grounds that are more justifiable or provable than any other practice of our own form of life, or of any other cultural community. What Wittgenstein disliked was not science and technology ‘as such’ – remember that he once studied engineering, and that he never lost interest in mechanical devices – but a scientistic stance that assumes that everything valuable in human life can be explained scientifically and thus controlled technologically (cf. CV 1998, 8–10). For Wittgenstein considered religious or mystical aspects of human life to be worthy of philosophical clarification. Understanding the religious stance will help us better understand the category of certainty.

2. William James on religion

2.1

Some philosophers believe Wittgenstein’s philosophical thinking about religious matters runs thus:

‘The earth goes around the sun’ is true if and only if the earth does indeed go around the sun; ‘Christ was resurrected from the dead’ is true if and only if Christ was resurrected from the dead. If the earth does not in fact revolve around the sun, or if Christ was not in fact resurrected from the dead, then the belief is false. (Vasiliou 2001, 29)

I will now attempt to show that such an approach is entirely misconceived: Wittgenstein did not look at a religious belief as if it were a particular belief or conviction that is similar to a mathematical, physical or historical conviction or claim which is true or false. For Wittgenstein, a religious belief is neither true nor false, for he conceives it as expressing a particular stance of a person toward the world, to other humans or human life in general.

2.2

William James’s influence on Wittgenstein’s thinking about religion can hardly be overestimated. Wittgenstein read James’s 1902 Gifford Lectures *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1912, and James’s treatment of religion substantially shaped Wittgenstein’s attitude towards his own life, as well as his views on ethics, myth and religion.⁸
In his lectures, James distinguished four kinds of phenomena that, because of equivocation, are usually categorized under the heading ‘religion’:

1. ‘the church’, that is ecclesiastical organizations and institutions (1902, 3, 334ff);
2. the fact that there are conventional religious practices like saying one’s prayers, baptizing one’s children, going on a pilgrimage, and so on (1902, 6);
3. usually complicated theological doctrines or theories by which people aim at a systematization of their religious belief-contents (1902, 337); and finally
4. genuine religious experiences, as for example awakenings, or religious attitudes towards human life (see below).

(1) Ecclesiastical organizations and (2) religious practices are usually investigated by religious studies (of a sociological, ethnological or historical kind). Neither James nor Wittgenstein really engaged in them, though both disparage the organization’s inherent will to power and its accompanying trait of developing ‘a hierarchy, honours, and official positions’ (CV 1998, 35; cf. James (1902), 334ff). In his Remarks on Frazer’s ‘Golden Bough’, Wittgenstein thinks about other cultures’ prima facie odd magical or mythological practices (2) and shows how they can be made intelligible even to us; the key is that they should not be looked at as primitive or naive scientific practices. Theological doctrines (3) are often scrutinized by philosophers, but neither James nor Wittgenstein feel tempted to engage in this. Whereas James declared himself to be a psychologist and therefore theologically incompetent (1902, 2), Wittgenstein, in the Tractatus, found a way to show that religious doctrines cannot be significant at all (for references, see below Section 3), and in the post-Tractatus period, he did not really pick up this issue again (see Section 4).

2.3

Both James and Wittgenstein focused their interest on (4) authentic religious experiences. James acknowledges that most reports of awakenings should be ascribed to ‘eccentric’ persons showing ‘symptoms of nervous instability’, and indeed some of them have certainly been ‘subject to abnormal psychical visitations’ (1902, 6). However, there are so many reports of (what James calls) religious experiences, many of which show a high degree of authenticity and veracity that it would be narrow-minded to belittle and neglect them all (1902, 11–18). In the
course of his lectures, James cites countless impressive examples – to be sure, they very much impressed Wittgenstein (cf. his letter to Russell, 22 June 1912; Drury 1981, 108).

In many of these reports, people describe their own authentic religious stance. That is, they do not describe their engagement in their community’s conventional religious practices (2). According to James, an ordinary religious believer merely lives a ‘second-hand religious life’: ‘His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit’, and he goes on: ‘We must search, rather, for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct’ (1902, 6). He then cites numerous reports that in presumably sincere ways describe and/or motivate specific attitudes towards the world and human life.

James develops, though not systematically, a rough (and certainly not complete) typology of these religious stances. According to him, there are:

1. the happy or ‘healthy-minded’ agnostics, who claim to have no interest and no need for traditional religion. From the late nineteenth century onwards, many members of the western tradition present themselves as scientistically minded and, because they feel happy, conceive of their own way of living as successful. Religious beliefs appear to them to be related to mental lability. James considers their strong non-religiousness as a peculiar modern form of religiousness (1902, 91–3).

2. the unhappy agnostics, who, in contrast to ordinary people, show an enhanced sensitivity to cruelty – both of nature and in human life – and indeed suffer from this. As one paradigm case outlines, they have as agnostics ‘no use for a God who permits such things … . I still thought that there might be a God. If so he would probably damn me, but I should have stand to it. I felt very little fear and no desire to propitiate him’ (1902, 177n).

3. the ‘healthy-minded’, ‘once-born’ religious believers, who ‘see God not as a strict judge … but as the animating spirit of a beautiful harmonious world, beneficent and kind, merciful as well as pure’ (1902, 80). They are optimistic, and usually consider the condition of the world as a whole, the position of man in nature, the relationship between men, and between God and men, as thoroughly benevolent (1902, 67f). Yet, ‘in some individuals optimism may become quasi-pathological; the capacity for even a transient sadness or a momentary humility seems cut off from them as by kind of congenital anaesthesia’ (1902, 83).
4. the opposite of the once-born enthusiasts, the ‘sick souls’, who suffer pessimistically from every aspect of the world and its condition, and who, in their state of melancholy and anhedonia, ignore or even deny any kind of good (1902, 144–7). In quasi-pathological cases, ‘the entire consciousness ... is so choked with the feeling of evil that the sense of there being any good in the world is lost ... altogether’ (1902, 149), especially when the individual considers himself in some way guilty, as the following example illustrates:

> Everything I saw seemed a burden to me; the earth seemed accursed for my sake: all trees, plants, rocks, hills and vales seemed to be dressed in mourning and groaning ... . My sins seemed to be laid open, so that I thought that everyone I saw knew them; ... sometimes it seemed to me as if everyone was pointing me out as the most guilty wretch upon earth. [...] When I waked in the morning, the first thought would be Oh, my wretched soul, what shall I do, where shall I go? And when I laid down, would say, I shall be perhaps in hell before morning. (1902, 159)

James adds that the ‘querulousness of mind tends in fact ... towards irreligion’ (1902, 149). According to him, there are cases in which ‘the sense that life had any meaning [...] whatever was for a time wholly withdrawn. The result was a transformation in the whole expression of reality’ (1902, 151).

5. the ‘twice-born’ believers, who are able to abandon the stance of a ‘sick soul’, as if they could get out of the tunnel on the other end and experience a second birth. ‘It may come gradually, or it may occur abruptly’ (1902, 175), that is by a specific religious awakening. Such a person begins to find himself ‘at one with all creation’. He lives in the universal life; he and man, he and nature, he and God, are one. That state of confidence, trust, union with all things, following upon the achievement of moral unity, is the ‘Faith-state’. Various dogmatic beliefs suddenly, on the advent of the faith-state, acquire a character of certainty, assume a new reality, become an object of faith. As the ground of assurance here is not rational, argumentation is irrelevant. (1902, 247)

The central characteristic trait of these people is ‘the loss of all the worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the willingness to be, even though the outer conditions should remain the same’ (1902, 248; cf. 1902, 271–4).
Against the background of James’s considerations, Wittgenstein’s philosophical attitude towards religion becomes easier to understand.

3. Wittgenstein on religion during the *Tractatus* period

3.1

From early on, Wittgenstein insists on a strict distinction between science and religion. In the *Tractatus*, he holds that language consists of propositions (TLP 4.001), that propositions are ‘concatenations’ of ‘names’ which refer to ‘objects’ in the world (TLP 3.21, 3.22, 4.22), that significant (*sinnvolle*) propositions depict possible states of affairs in the world (TLP 4.1, 4.2), and that ‘the totality of true [and significant] propositions is the total natural science’\(^{10}\) (TLP 4.11; cf. TLP 6.53). On this view, therefore, religious propositions that express religious doctrines and claim to be true, for example ‘God is omniscient’, turn out to be nonsensical (*unsinnig*), since they consist of names that purportedly refer to objects that do not belong to the world, and thereby fall out of the range of the significant propositions of natural science.\(^{11}\) A *Tractarian* proposition that does away with these kinds of religious or theological theses is: ‘God does not reveal himself in the world’ (TLP 6.432).

3.2

Moreover, there are religious propositions that are not as nonsensical as theological theses, but that are ‘inexpressible’ (*unaussprechlich*; TLP 6.522) since they claim to ‘say’ things that can only be ‘shown’ (TLP 4.1212). To be sure, the *Tractarian* doctrine of ‘showing’ mainly applies to logical matters: to the logical constants, to the tautologies as logical propositions, or to the logical scaffolding of language and the world (TLP 4.023, 4.0312, 6.1; ‘logic’ here means propositional and predicate logic and its philosophical interpretation). Yet, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* was unable to provide any deeper reason for why logic is as it is: ‘Logic must take care of itself’ was his way out (TLP 5.473). This means, presumably, that logic is where reasons, explanations or justifications come to an end. Thus, logic is merely postulated on the insight that it needs to be presupposed in order to make Wittgenstein’s *Tractarian* view of significant language and its relation to the world work. *Tractarian* logic has therefore to be accepted as it is, and what is left to us is not our knowledge, but our astonishment that logic is that way: that is ‘the mystical’ (TLP 6.522).

This insight also applies to the world as a whole: significant propositions only depict possible states of affairs, possible sections of the world.
But there is no possible significant proposition that depicts the world as a whole (since ‘the world’ is a name, not a proposition), and there are no significant propositions that explain why the world as a whole came into existence: ‘not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is’ (TLP 6.44).

3.3

Though the world, the sum of all existing states of affairs, might be exactly the same, there are still different possible stances towards it. Wittgenstein obviously alludes to James’s distinction between the (1) happy agnostics, (3) ‘once-born’ or (5) ‘twice-born’ believers on the one hand and the (2) ‘unhappy agnostics’ or (4) ‘sick souls’ on the other, when he declares: ‘The world of the happy [man] is quite another than that of the unhappy [man]’ (TLP 6.43). However, propositions that purport to express these stances – for example ‘Peter is a “twice-born” believer’ or ‘I am a “sick soul”’ – should, according to the *Tractatus*, be rated as inexpressible. As in the case of ‘Lucy is happy’, ‘I am sad’, or ‘Ralph believes that there is a spy’, these propositions merely appear to depict specific sections of the world by stating which stance a person is in or which mental property a person has. Some of this might indeed be specifiable by scientistic descriptions of states that some kinds of bodies might be in – at least according to a materialistic conception of psychology that is not ruled out by the *Tractatus* (cf. TLP 4.1121, 5.541, 5.631, 5.641, and Wittgenstein’s letter to Russell, 19 August 1919). Nevertheless, those propositions aim at ascribing a property to a person, a ‘subject’ or a ‘soul’ (or a ‘mind’ respectively) (TLP 5.542–5.5421) but, according to the *Tractatus*, there are neither ‘subjects’ nor souls in the world (TLP 5.5421). A ‘subject’, rather, belongs to the world’s limits, and the world’s limits do not belong to the world itself (TLP 5.631–5.632). Therefore, there are no significant propositions that can depict a state that a ‘subject’ or soul is in. The *Tractatus* accounts for understanding the world and for understanding propositions, but not for understanding persons and their attitudes.

Consequently, there are no specifiable significant reasons that explain or justify a particular religious stance. Whereas James puts it this way: ‘As the ground of assurance here is not rational, argumentation is irrelevant’ (1902, 247), Wittgenstein in his *Lecture on Ethics* declares religious propositions that express a specific stance – for example, ‘I wonder at the existence of the world’ or ‘I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens’ (remember James’s ‘once-’ and ‘twice-born’ believers) – straightforwardly as ‘nonsense’ (LE 41). On the other hand, the ungroundable
conviction or stance that the world is meaningful amounts to the same as believing in the existence of God. Wittgenstein here obviously alludes to James's 'sick soul', who lacks this belief and considers the world and his or her life as meaningless (see above, 1902, 151). In a blatantly anti-scientific tone, Wittgenstein writes in his *Notebooks*: ‘To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter [daß es mit den Tatsachen der Welt noch nicht abgetan ist]. To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning’ (NB 74). Extrapolating from this remark, one can speculate that hinting at God may serve as the end of explaining why there is ‘meaning’ after all, that is, in life, in the world, and as regards propositions. Wittgenstein later adds in his *Notebooks*: ‘I am conscious of the complete unclarity [or inexpressibility; cf. TLP 6.522] of all these sentences’ (NB 79).

What all this amounts to is the insight that a person’s religious stance towards the world and human life is beyond the realm of significant reasoning:

We feel that even if all possible scientific questions are answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and this itself is the answer. (TLP 6.52)

The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem.

(Is this not the reason why those to whom the sense of life became clear after doubting for a long time, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?) (TLP 6.521)

What has to be accepted, the stance, can be ‘shown’ at best and is, thus, neither true nor false nor significantly dubitable.

3.4

Though Wittgenstein was ‘of the opinion that the problems [of logic, of language, of the world, and of life] have essentially been finally solved’ (TLP, Preface), many of his *Tractarian* views are strikingly recalcitrant to open-minded philosophical intuitions. Why should anyone appreciate a philosophy of logic and language that demands, on the meagre ground that propositions of the following kinds are neither true nor false, that everybody rates (normative) ethical and aesthetical propositions (TLP 6.42–6.421) as well as commands, questions, promises, exclamations, declarations or prayers as nonsensical or inexpressible (cf. PI 23, 27)? And why should it be impossible to properly understand persons and their attitudes?
4. The later Wittgenstein on religion

4.1
Though his philosophy of language ran through remarkable changes after the *Tractarian* period, Wittgenstein did not alter his overall attitude towards the phenomenon of religion. In his scattered remarks as well as in notes taken by his students, he remains uninterested in criticizing ecclesiastical organizations, he refrains from describing religious practices in an ethnological manner, and he resists discussing specific theological doctrines (he seems to view theology as a confused attempt at intellectualizing a non-propositional and non-cognitive stance, alienated from authentic ‘experiences’, resulting in dull and dogmatic claims (e.g., ‘theology that insists on particular words and phrases and prohibits others makes nothing clearer (Karl Barth)’ (CV 1998, 97)). Instead, Wittgenstein aims mainly towards a better understanding of what a religious stance is, how it reveals itself in one’s activities – for example in uttering specific expressions or in showing a specific attitude towards human life – and in what sense a religious stance is different from a scientific or empirical attitude. What does change, however, is that he no longer rates religious propositions as nonsensical or inexpressible.

For in his philosophy of language, the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* and of *On Certainty* abandons the search for a universal and strict criterion of sense or significance (PI 97, 107–9; OC 350). What an expression means should now be specified in terms of its use in the respective language-game (PI 43, 560; Z 173; CV 1998, 53, 97); that is, by making explicit the respective constitutive ‘grammatical’ rules of the practice in question. As outlined in Sections 1.1–1.2 above, it is the whole of our practices that make our words and deeds (as well as our life) meaningful, not God. The task of philosophy is to realize that expressions that appear to be of the same kind have in fact quite different uses and thus different meanings (PI 116). For example, not all significant nouns must refer to objects or events (think of ‘pain’, ‘mind’, ‘I’, ‘knowledge’ or ‘God’), and not all meaningful verbs should be looked at as naming processes (think of ‘thinking’, ‘meaning’, ‘understanding’ or ‘praying’).

4.2
In general, empirical or scientific propositions are true and false, and if someone denies an empirical proposition $p$, she presumably holds $\neg p$ to be true. At least, this is how propositional logic as well as the ‘logic’ of an epistemic practice usually works: if someone believes that $p$ and I do not, I am contradicting that person; and there is often the possibility
of determining who of us is right and who is wrong. On the other hand, if someone believes, say, in the Last Judgement and I do not, it need not be the case that one of us is right and the other wrong (cf. LC 53); ‘the characteristic feature of ritualistic action [or a religious stance] is not at all a view, an opinion, whether true or false’ (GB 129; cf. GB 137). To look at religious beliefs as a matter of truth and falsity, is, according to Wittgenstein, to confuse religious belief with ‘superstition’, that is ‘a sort of false science’ (CV 1998, 82; cf. LC 59). He insists that a religious stance or faith ‘is not a scientific belief, has nothing to do with scientific convictions’ (CV 1998, 72; cf. LC 57; OC 239, 336). Apparently, the kind of religious belief that Wittgenstein is mainly interested in is not a genuine belief at all: it is rather a stance that is at best oddly depicted by means of a proposition (see Section 5.4 below). For unlike believing in \( p \), where \( p \) belongs to an epistemic practice, believing in the Last Judgement is expressing a specific ‘attitude’ (LC 71) towards human life (LC 55). A person who ‘made this guidance for this life’ (LC 53) might act with great confidence, whatever happens.

If the believer in God looks around and asks ‘Where does everything I see come from?’…, what he hankers after is not a (causal) explanation; and the point of his question is that it is the expression of this hankering. He is expressing, then, a stance // an attitude // towards all explanations. – But how is this manifested in his life?

It is the attitude of taking a certain matter seriously … .

Really what I should like to say is that here too what is important is not the words you use or what you think while saying them, so much as the difference that they make at different points in your life (CV 1998, 96–7; ‘attitude’ is Wittgenstein’s own variant)

It appears to me as though a religious belief could only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of coordinates. Hence although it’s belief, it is really a way of living, or a way of judging life. Passionately taking up this interpretation (CV 1998, 73; my emphasis)

‘We don’t talk about hypothesis, or about high probability. Nor about knowing’. (LC 57)

[In a conversation with Drury:] If you and I are to live religious lives, it mustn’t be that we talk a lot about religion, but our manner of life is different. (Drury 1981, 109; my emphasis)

From this point of view, ‘the historical grounds of the Gospels might, in the historical sense, be demonstrably false, and yet belief would lose nothing through this …., because the historical proof (the historical
proof-game) is irrelevant to belief’ (CV 1998, 37–8). Though a religious believer may assure us that he has a proof, these kinds of proofs are rarely compelling to anyone else. ‘[H]e has what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for all in his life’ (LC 54). Analogously, James points out that a religious stance or attitude just happens to be there: ‘As the ground of assurance here is not rational, argumentation is irrelevant’ (1902, 247).

Practising science, or engaging in other epistemic activities that aim at explaining our natural and social world, is usually rooted in the hope to somehow control the course of events. Being in a particular religious stance, however, may amount to trying to cope with one’s own uncontrollable fate: ‘Fate is the antithesis of natural law. A natural law is something you try to fathom, and make use of, fate is not’ (CV 1998, 70). ‘It simply isn’t a theory’, rather it is ‘a sigh, or a cry’ (CV 1998, 34–5). Thus, by means of utterances like ‘We are not masters of our fate’ or ‘It is God’s will’, one may express one’s stance that one accepts the fact that not everything in human life is under our command, or that a man cannot always be made responsible for what happens (CV 1998, 69). Such a stance may enable people to go on living after suffering from a cruel blow of fate.

4.3

‘Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning’ (Z 173); ‘practice gives words their sense’ (CV 1998, 97; cf. OC 229; RC III 317). The just mentioned interpretation of ‘It is God’s will’ may be looked at as a paradigm sample of how one can make sense of the use of the word ‘God’ without positing the existence of a transcendent being: ‘Our talk gets its sense from the rest of our actions’ (OC 229; my translation), and ‘the way you use the word “God” does not show whom you mean, but what you mean’ (CV 1998, 58; cf. LC 59). Wittgenstein still aims at an interpretation of religion or, more precisely, of a religious stance, without evoking theological theorizing that purports to be true (in a ‘correspondence’-sense). Accordingly, a religious practice like praying must not be seen as a conversation with God or some saint, but may be interpreted as a rule-governed activity by means of which one expresses one’s religious stance, similarly to avowals that express pain (PI 244; LW I 203). From this point of view, a religious practice is not a conceptual practice at all (contrary to Hyman 2001, 6).

Correspondingly, the leitmotif of the Remarks on Frazer’s ‘Golden Bough’ consists in Wittgenstein’s insistence that religious or mythological
narrations should not be understood as true or false reports of what actually happened. Rather, they should be looked at as apparently theoretical ‘devices’ on which members of a cultural community agree: these narrations serve as a platform which shapes and belongs to a community’s cognitive world-picture. They motivate their members’ non-cognitive stance towards the world and human life, and they function as the ground where explanations indeed come to an end. Accordingly, a religious stance may be shown by manifestly protecting our natural environment (cf. ‘preserving the Creation’) or by standing up for other people’s dignity.

4.4

In epistemic practices, one may develop specific convictions or skills – an epistemic stance, so-to-speak – by making some observations or having experiences, or by reading books and receiving instruction, and when competent, one may decide or commit oneself to go on. One may also decide to learn specific theories or acquire particular techniques. However, the matter is different when it comes to adopting a religious stance: that does not result merely from an intentionally made decision. One can hardly imagine scientifically educated members of the current western form of life who hear about James’s happy believers or who read for the first time a book concerning the Last Judgement, or the resurrection of Christ, and then decide: ‘I believe that’ (cf. OC 239). An alteration of one’s religious stance, a ‘passionately taking up this interpretation’ (CV 1998, 73), rather seems to require a complicated set of changes that is usually beyond one’s control: ‘Life can educate you to “believing in God.” And experiences too are what do this … e.g., sufferings of various sorts. And they do not show us God as a sense experience does an object … – life can force this concept on us’ (CV 1998, 97). Similarly, James’s authentic ‘first-hand’ reports indicate that the development of a conscious religious stance is not based on decisions or insights, but on consciously becoming aware of an attitude that gradually or suddenly ‘happened’ to be there. In other words, one cannot force oneself into a particular stance.

As regards this issue, Wittgenstein seemed to have encountered a personal problem. His friends’ personal recollections, biographies of Wittgenstein, and some of his own entries of confessional character in Culture and Value strongly indicate that he was not an altogether happy person, but suffered from the imperfections of his intellectual as well as moral character (measured against his own high standards). He appeared to crave for relief from his weaknesses; that is, in religious terms, for redemption. Wittgenstein’s own understanding was presumably that a proper religious stance would require of him a total absence
of vanity (Drury 1981, 93; introduction to PR), as well as a particular sort of decency towards himself, his friends and human life in general (CV 1998, 51). He was apparently unable to deliver; that is, unable to develop the sort of decency that he considered appropriate:

I am reading: ‘And no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost’. And it is true: I cannot call him Lord; because that says absolutely nothing to me. [...] Because I do not believe that he will come to judge me; because that says nothing to me. And it could only say something to me if I were to live quite differently [...]. What fights doubt is as it were redemption. (CV 1998, 38–9)

Believing means, submitting to an authority. (CV 1998, 52)

I cannot kneel to pray because it’s as though my knees were stiff. I am afraid of dissolution (of my own dissolution) should I become soft. (CV 1998, 63)

Amongst other things Christianity says, I believe, that sound doctrines are useless. That you have to change your life. (Or the direction of your life). [...] For a sound doctrine need not seize you, like a doctor’s prescription. (CV 1998, 61)

Because a religious stance cannot be put together intentionally, one usually has to accept the stance one is currently in as part of one’s own fate. If the religious stance is not the one that one considers appropriate, religious or theological doctrines will not help, since they are not of a technological kind, as theories in epistemic practices usually are. ‘Religion says: Do this – Think like that! but it cannot justify this and it only need try to do so to become repugnant … . It is more convincing to say: “Think like this” – however strange it may seem’ (CV 1998, 34). If someone’s religious stance indeed changes (remember James’s twice-born), what counts is that this person arrives at new commitments (CV 1998, 73).

5. Certainty with regard to knowledge and religion

5.1

The later Wittgenstein does not treat religion, either in On Certainty or elsewhere in his writings, as a somehow derivative case of normal, scientific or empirical knowledge. In focusing on a ‘deeper’ understanding of the peculiar role that a religious stance may have in human life, he offers, as it were, a non-cognitive ‘theology for atheists, an understanding of religion from the outside (as an anthropological phenomenon) which does not accuse it of being either mistaken, unfounded or nonsensical’
It must now be shown that the remarks of On Certainty can indeed be read as a ‘noncognitive theology for epistemologists’, for they aim at a ‘deeper’ understanding of our epistemic stance. The interpretation of certainty as being identical with some of the constitutive rules of (epistemic) practices (Section 1) is supplemented by comparing certainty with a religious stance.

Like James who described a believer’s confident ‘faith-state’ as having ‘a character of certainty’ for which ‘argumentation is irrelevant’ (1902, 247), Wittgenstein draws a connection between a religious stance and certainty: ‘If I am REALLY redeemed, – I need certainty – not wisdom, dreams, speculation – and this certainty is faith. And faith is what my heart, my soul, needs, not my speculative intellect. […] One may say: it is love that believes in the Resurrection’ (CV 1998, 38–9). The ‘category’ of certainty is obviously detached from any kind of (scientific) knowledge or reasoning (cf. OC 308). He continues: ‘perfect certainty is only a matter of a man’s attitude (OC 404; my translation and emphasis), or ‘certainty is as it were a tone of voice’ (OC 30; cf. OC 357). Wittgenstein even regards certainty as a form of life, adding that this is badly expressed (OC 358), and I suggest that one should rather say that being certain is showing a stance that indicates to which form of life one belongs (OC 89). In other words, the epistemic stance of being certain is the ‘proto-phenomenon (Urphänomen)’ (PI 654) on which our (epistemic) practices are supposed, among other things, to rest.

5.2

But what is a stance? The German expression Wittgenstein usually uses is ‘Einstellung’, rarely ‘Stellungnahme’ (CV 1998, 97; LW I 476, 772, 915, 953), sometimes ‘Annahme’ (assumption, acceptance or hypothesis; OC 134, 146, 196; RPP II 280–3) or ‘Grundanschauung’ (fundamental attitude; OC 238; GB 119). ‘Einstellung’ can be rendered ‘attitude’ (OC 381, 404; PI 310, 575, 672–3, p. 178, p. 205), ‘disposition’ (cf. PI 417, 441; RPP II 281), ‘relation to’ (PI, p. 192), or ‘(point of) view’ (LW I 476), and there are semantic overlaps with ‘adjustment’ (PI 495, 645–6; OC 89) and ‘acknowledgement’ (OC 378). Obviously, both ‘Einstellung’ and ‘stance’ have a vague meaning in ordinary language as well as in Wittgenstein’s writings. To develop a more technical meaning, I will compare a stance with a mood.

A mood is like a tone or colour that pervades all our conscious states. As a matter of fact, human beings are always in some mood: in an elated or a depressed mood, in a cheerful or a downcast mood – though not all moods are specifiable in particular terms. Ordinarily we are in a somewhat
'neutral mood' that is neither especially elated nor especially depressed, neither euphoric nor melancholic. Normal people in normal circumstances hardly think about the mood they are in, and it is therefore rarely the case that moods become conscious. It is easier to be aware of them in extreme cases: depression, excitement, euphoria, and so on. Moods are merely part of our mental states, in addition to emotions, sensations, beliefs, desires. But in contrast to these, moods lack any intentional ‘directedness’ towards some ‘object’. Whereas one may easily specify the reason why one is in love or in sorrow, or why one desires \( p \), it is often difficult or even impossible to say why one is in the mood one is in. Moods happen to be there. A mood must not necessarily be linked to a reason or a justification, it cannot be rated rational or irrational, it is neither true nor false, and the terms ‘error’ and ‘correctness’ do not apply. Yet, we humans should not be ashamed of our moods; rather, these attitudes fundamentally belong to what it is to live a human life.

One may say that Wittgenstein adds a mythological or religious dimension to moods. He himself sees a close relation: ‘I would like to say: the attitude [\textit{Einstellung}] comes before the opinion. (Isn’t belief in God an attitude?)’ (LW II, p. 38). We have seen that a religious attitude or stance shows the same characteristics as a mood: it is not necessarily linked to reason or justification (LC 58), it is neither rational nor irrational, neither true nor false, and there is no error possible. One could say, then, that we are always in one religious stance or another (remember James categorizing irreligiousness as a peculiar form of religiousness). Therefore, when Wittgenstein tells his friend Drury: ‘I am not a religious man but cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view’ (1981, 94), the second part of this remark presumably means that, as regards every situation in a human’s life or every deed, one can make oneself conscious of the religious stance one is in, or of the stance other humans are probably in (cf. LW I 957–8). We may look at everything from an ‘existential’ point of view and relate it, in extreme cases, to feeling fundamentally safe or entirely threatened. Moreover, each event may be rated according to its contribution to the ‘meaning of life’, that is, one may think about how it can be integrated into the ‘horizon’ or the world-picture of a particular form of life (a world-picture includes cultural values).

5.3

Wittgenstein has himself pointed out that a religious stance (or belief), an epistemic stance (or belief) and a mood have something in common: ‘I believe ...’ throws light on my state. Conclusions about my conduct can be drawn from this expression. So there is a similarity here to
expressions of emotion, of mood, etc.’ (PI, p. 191). Accordingly, *an epistemic stance of certainty*, which is the attitude of taking something for granted, can equally be characterized as a human state which always – in each situation and in every *deed* – happened to be there, namely as the ‘inherited background’ of all our thinking and acting that functions as the ‘basis’ or the ‘foundation’ for all our activities (cf. OC 94, 411, 414). Yet, being in an epistemic stance is different from having an opinion (OC 282; GB 123), since it is not a matter of being true and false (OC 205) or of being reasonable or unreasonable (OC 166, 559); it is not based on justification (OC 175, 613, 620; CV 1998, 34), it is usually not called in question (OC 87, 196, 524), and the possibility of error is ruled out (OC 155; GB 121). As a matter of fact, an epistemic stance belongs to human life, ‘as something animal’ (OC 359) or instinctive (OC 475); it simply has to be accepted under normal circumstances (OC 559) – it is our *epistemic fate*. Which religious or epistemic stance one is in can be revealed by the way one acts, that is by being confident and taking things for granted, or by being undecided, insecure, and so on (OC 7, 89). We are not, however, usually conscious of our epistemic stances, though we can make ourselves conscious of them (OC 103, 414). Yet, expressing one’s religious or epistemic stance by means of linguistic expressions often results in utterances that sound odd in normal circumstances (OC 467, 553). A full description of a person’s epistemic stance would consist in describing his or her world-picture.

It belongs to our overall epistemic stance, that is to our world-picture, that we are – as Hume showed – unjustifiably convinced that the world more or less remains regular, that is that ‘facts do not buck’ (cf. OC 616–19). One may be tempted to ‘explain’ this by expressing one’s religious stance – for example ‘this is how God created the world’ (meaning: this is the end of explanation) – such that the epistemic conviction of the world’s causal determination gains a religious tone. It definitely belongs to the presuppositions of all our practices – to our epistemic fate – to ‘believe’ that there are regularities in all courses of events, since only then can we expect that the constitutive rules of our practices give all our sayings and deeds meaning. For if the facts *did* buck, for example if trees gradually change into men or cattle in the fields speak comprehensible words (OC 513), we would lose our orientation (OC 617).

A person’s epistemic stance that resembles a person’s mood shows traits of a ‘subjective’ state. Wittgenstein thematizes this aspect in terms of ‘subjective certainty’ (OC 174, 179, 245, 563), and he insists that this is ‘a logical, and not a psychological’ consideration (OC 447). Presumably he means that it belongs to the ‘logic’ of a practice that its
participants are always in a particular mood or show a specific religious or epistemic stance (OC 459). To be sure, the way we treat people also depends on our awareness of the mood or religious and epistemic stance they are in. For though a mood or a stance is something subjective (in the sense that it needs, so to speak, a ‘bearer’), it is recognizable and understandable by others.

5.4
Yet, there are also dissimilarities between a mood, a religious and an epistemic stance. Moods may be specified by adjectives; a religious stance becomes manifest by prayers, similes (CV 1998, 34), exclamations or confessions; and an epistemic stance is expressed by propositions (e.g., ‘This is a hand’). A mood or a religious stance does not define truth, but a certainty does (cf. Section 1). Whereas moods and religious stances usually turn up or happen to be there, certainties must be ‘acquired’ (cf. OC 279), for example by developing one’s mother-tongue (OC 527) or by adopting a community’s world-picture (OC 167, 262). Though there are no justifications as regards certainties of primitive practices, one may nevertheless decide (OC 368, 378) to adopt certainties of elaborated practices. This amounts to a gradual ‘conversion’ into another world-picture, and if ‘teachers’ are involved, they do not convince their students, but engage in ‘persuasion’ (OC 262, 669), akin to missionaries that aim at converting natives (OC 612). But usually, you cannot simply ‘talk’ someone ‘into’ another mood or a new stance by ‘Do this! Think like that!’ (CV 1998, 34) – perhaps, if being in a peculiar stance or mood results in a person’s self-destruction, a therapist might help cut that person loose from the grip of that state.

5.5
During his lifetime, the sincere and authentic Wittgenstein was constantly searching for his own religious and philosophical stance; that is, for his own way of looking at the world and human life. His philosophical stance also appears to be beyond further reasoning, so much so that his philosophical account – cf. ‘We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place’ (PI 109; cf. GB 121) – lacks a ‘critical bite’. For instance, if someone insists that saying ‘It is God’s will’ does imply the existence of a transcendent being – that is how he uses these words; if he actually considers Christ’s Resurrection a historical event and looks at theological doctrines as true theories (involving their own standards of rationality), Wittgenstein cannot object. Similarly, if someone insists that only scientific explanations are acceptable
explanations, Wittgenstein must tolerate it. He may merely point out that he feels ‘intellectually very distant’ from him (OC 108; cf. OC 336).14

Notes

1. On the historical background of these remarks, see Kober (1993), 15–25 and (1996), 411ff.
3. I have to admit that, for the sake of succinctness, my elucidations make Wittgenstein a bit more systematic and doctrinaire than he himself would have liked; for further discussion, see Kober (1993), (1996) and (1997).
4. The blueprint example is due to Baker and Hacker (1985), 48.
5. Kripke (1982), 7–54 has illuminatingly argued for this.
9. One may say that James speaks of ‘ideal types’ in Max Weber’s sense; cf. Weber (1904), 90–103.
10. Here, my translation, as for all passages from the Tractatus (TLP) in this chapter, follows Ogden’s translation.
11. On this account, ‘Christ was resurrected from the dead’ is a false proposition. That this is a dull interpretation will be shown in Sections 4.2 and 5.1 below.
13. Of course, some people assure us of having encountered God or an angel in peculiar circumstances. I guess, Wittgenstein was simply not interested in this.
14. I am grateful to Omar Riviera and Danièle Moyal-Sharrock for kindly improving my English. This contribution is dedicated to my unforgotten friend, Georg Henrik von Wright.
Part IV
The Therapeutic Reading
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On Wittgenstein’s Response to Scepticism: The Opening of On Certainty

Edward Minar

1. Introduction

Does Wittgenstein’s On Certainty point to a sustained treatment of philosophical problems about knowledge and justification of the kind that Philosophical Investigations supplies for matters of mind, language and their relation to the world? Some of the reasons for pessimism are systematic. Casting about for why Moore’s pronouncements about the external world and his knowledge thereof, as well as sceptical doubts concerning them, are prone to strike him at one time as nonsense, at another as perfectly intelligible, Wittgenstein acknowledges that ‘it is ... difficult to find the beginning. Or better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning’ (OC 471). A little earlier, struggling with the idea that ‘propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts’ (OC 401), he dismisses this way of talking as ‘thoroughly bad’ (OC 402) and complains, ‘I cannot yet say the thing I really want to say’ (OC 400).

These moments of hesitancy about what one should say at the limit are not new; in Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, Wittgenstein had noted that ‘[t]he difficult thing here is not, to dig down to the ground; no, it is to recognize the ground that lies before us as the ground’ (RFM 333). In the context of On Certainty, these difficulties emerge when we seek a unified, stable Wittgensteinian position on the issues raised by Moore’s defence of common sense and the scepticism it is meant to counter. As we proceed, we expect to find something along the lines of an account of certainty that will accurately capture the ‘grammar’ of our practices of inquiry. This account will, we anticipate, demonstrate the nonsense of the sceptic’s global demand for justification of such practices by explaining what makes them possible and then
showing that as a condition of their possibility, they do not stand in need of the kind of grounding the sceptic seeks.

Here, in Wittgenstein’s eyes, we have begun by looking for the wrong thing. We have sought to unearth the hidden structure of justification which would reveal where the grounds and limits of knowledge really lie. Wittgenstein’s main purpose is to examine the terms in which we would raise and motivate the demand for such a structure. He provides reminders that bring us back to our actual sayings and doings for the purpose of getting us to see the ground before us as the ground. Pointing to the actual shape of our practices hardly proves the falsity or emptiness of a definite sceptical position. It is not intended to do so. Instead, Wittgenstein’s reminders prod the sceptic to account for his sense that something is amiss in our dealings with the world. The anticipated result is that the sceptic will no longer find his questions natural or mandatory. Wittgenstein’s is a strategy for responding to both scepticism and the impulse to refute it. It may seem inherently disappointing. But we shall need to ask whether our disappointment stems from a sense that the sceptic must somehow be answerable; that our epistemic practices must somehow partake of a hidden, justificatory structure, one which the sceptic’s investigation (depending on our view of its success) has either pointed to or conjured up.

In calling attention to the lack of a ‘sharp boundary between propositions of logic and empirical propositions’ (OC 319), Wittgenstein expresses what may be the key thought in On Certainty: ‘The concept “proposition” is itself not a sharp one’ (OC 320). Without a determinate notion of proposition, it is hard to make sense of the idea that each candidate for rational belief carries with it, as part of its ‘meaning-body’ (PI 559), a way of fixing, for all circumstances, what possibilities count as relevant doubts as to its truth or justification. Yet the determinacy of sceptical doubt, even the sceptic’s entitlement to call it doubt, depends on this picture of the proposition as somehow involving or containing something that ties down, for each context of its use, determinants of its epistemic status. When we suspect that the sceptic has simply mistaken the real structure of empirical propositions – when we read On Certainty with the insistence that this kind of refutation of the sceptic must be available – we prematurely concede the possibility and availability of a point of view from which our practices can be surveyed with detachment. From this position, the sceptic’s questions cannot help but seem natural.

I shall begin by criticizing two ways of understanding Wittgenstein’s treatment of what he calls ‘objective certainty’. Something is objectively
certain when ‘a mistake is not possible’ (OC 194); when, therefore, it cannot be rendered doubtful by introducing a possible mistake. Wittgenstein assigns this status to ‘immovable’ (OC 655) items which ‘stand fast’ (OC 116). ‘[I]t belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations’, he says, ‘that certain things are in deed not doubted’ (OC 342). They ‘are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges’ (OC 341) on which our questions and doubts turn, without which our ways of inquiring would fall into disarray.

How are we to understand this talk of hinges? To what is this special role being ascribed? On a first, ‘propositional’ interpretation, we stand in non-epistemic relations to ‘Moore-type propositions’, which include those particulars like ‘This is a hand’ which Moore finds absurd to doubt,1 as well as the consequences he thinks follow from them (‘external objects exist’). On a second, non-propositional interpretation, it is our practices, or specific actions within them, to which the status in question is ascribed.2 On each, Wittgenstein’s account of hinges is supposed to answer the sceptic. What is held fast is not, as a matter of logic, open to challenge, so the sceptic fails meaningfully to extend his doubt to the framework constituted by what is held fast and within which actual doubts make sense. Both interpretations reflect important facets of what Wittgenstein actually says; no doubt his remarks invite them. Neither, however, supplies Wittgenstein with a compelling response to scepticism. The problem, as I shall emphasize, is that in seeking a theory that, by tying down the limits and grounds of our practices, will contribute to a direct demonstration of the meaninglessness of sceptical doubt, these accounts are looking for a kind of closure that Wittgenstein not only cannot, but also does not aim to, provide.

What might a different approach to reading On Certainty as a response to scepticism look like? I shall begin at the beginning – with OC 1–65 of On Certainty, relatively continuous notes from a single manuscript in which direct mention of such things as propositions which ‘stand fast’, hinges, world pictures and frameworks is absent.3 I shall examine how, in these sections, Wittgenstein aims to refine our sense of what is at stake between Moore and the sceptic. I shall propose that his extended comparison between the status of rules of calculation and the role of sentences of the kind Moore offers as certainties (see especially OC 25–33, 38–50) is meant to help to force the sceptic’s commitments out into the open and to reveal that the costs of scepticism are higher than or anyway different from what the sceptic would have us believe. This kind of criticism will inevitably be inconclusive. The sceptic may not recognize himself in Wittgenstein’s portrayal. The tolls of his
posture of alienation from our practices will be hard to assess. The sceptic may claim to embrace alienation as the condition of his enterprise, to have shown that it is a reflection of his true position. Wittgenstein’s depiction of our ongoing life in language – of our real condition – is his only resource for showing otherwise.

I shall not attempt to give a precise characterization of the scepticism that is Wittgenstein’s target. To a certain extent, at least, Wittgenstein relies on our thinking that we know what the sceptic’s prospects are, what the sceptic wants to or has to say. Further, in the early pages of On Certainty, he uses our reactions to Moore to force us to articulate this understanding of the sceptic. We are led to ask what sort of position scepticism must be for it to provoke a response like Moore’s, the inadequacy of which seems patent, but the wholesale suppression of which would leave us feeling like we had been somehow deprived of our say. What emerges in the process of trying to make sense of the grip of scepticism on the one hand and its incredibility on the other is not a stable position as much as a deep-seated tendency of thought, a deeply resonant fantasy.

2. Hinges

Taking what stands fast to be ‘absolutely solid’ is ‘part of our method of doubt and enquiry’ (OC 151). About the hinges around which inquiry turns, Wittgenstein says, ‘no doubt can exist if making judgments is to be possible at all’ (OC 308). We feel inclined to say that ‘[d]oubt comes after belief’ (OC 160) and that to try to doubt our certainties is not genuinely to doubt at all: ‘somewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable: it is part of judging’ (OC 150). In normal circumstances I have ‘no system at all’ in which doubts about such things as whether I have two hands can arise (OC 247); with such matters, ‘I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions’ (OC 248). Although what stands fast finds expression in what seem to be empirical propositions, it is often taken to play a normative role in the relevant system or practice. To question what stands fast, or even not to accept it, may be thought to negate the terms of inquiry, to betoken a lack of understanding, or to move outside the rules of a given practice into nonsense. As a result, challenging what Marie McGinn calls ‘judgments of the frame’ – that ‘mass of ... judgments which form, in the context, the completely unquestioned background against which all enquiry, description of the world, confirmation and disconfirmation of belief, etc., goes on’ (1989, 103) – turns out,
contra the sceptic, to be illegitimate. Acceptance of this ‘scaffolding of our thoughts’ (OC 211), even though it is expressed in ‘propositions … which Moore retails as examples of … known truths [so-called Moore-type propositions]’ (OC 137), is therefore a condition of intelligibility. Or so it all may seem. (Reason to hesitate about taking this often-foundationalist-sounding talk too strongly lies in the fact that upon arriving at ‘the rock bottom of my convictions’ in OC 248, Wittgenstein immediately says ‘one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house’ (OC 248). (Some foundation, we are to think.)

According to Avrum Stroll, Wittgenstein holds that ‘propositions evincing knowledge claims belong to the language game, whereas certainty grounds the language game and is a condition of its possibility’ (1994, 7). What stands fast is a ‘deeper sort of commitment’ to ‘non-human reality and to the human community’ (ibid.) On Stroll’s reading, Wittgenstein’s view of certainty is difficult to untangle because it has separate, incompatible strands. On an earlier, propositional view, what stands fast is propositions or propositional attitudes in context (‘At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded’ (OC 253)). This view is gradually, although never completely, displaced by a more viable non-propositional story. One reason the propositional view is implausible is that it has to explain why some apparently empirical propositions play a special role in grounding the language-game and are thus ‘removed from the traffic’ (OC 210). As propositions, they seem available for assertoric uses which would in some contexts appear to express beliefs. These beliefs, once brought forward, could be subjected to sceptical scrutiny. Stroll says little to quell this suspicion; he thinks that the propositional account is inferior partly because it cannot stave off the sceptic’s assimilation of the certainty that stands fast to (presumed) propositional knowledge.

Marie McGinn’s interpretation of the role of ‘Moore-type propositions’ is vulnerable to similar worries. McGinn is concerned to show that Wittgenstein’s account of hinge-propositions is not just a dogmatic insistence that the propositions constituting the framework of inquiry are too obvious ever to be doubted. Like Stroll, she takes very seriously Wittgenstein’s comparison between understanding rules and our ways of relating to what stands fast. One of her main contentions is that ‘at the bottom of our practice lies, not knowledge, but practical abilities to employ conceptual techniques’ (1989, 145). This expresses real insight into Wittgenstein’s use of the comparison. McGinn may well go astray, however, in taking herself to have an account of Moore-type propositions that explains, from a reflective but naturalistic point of view, why
'judgments of the frame' are immune to doubt. These judgements are not subjected to regular justificatory procedures because they 'are held to play, in the context, the role of determining or constituting our techniques of empirical description ... for which the question of justification makes no sense' (1989, 142, 146).

I have difficulty in knowing how to understand this. For McGinn, certainty lies in 'practical mastery of descriptive techniques that is expressed in how we act, i.e., in the judgments we affirm (either explicitly or implicitly) in the course of our active, everyday lives' (1989, 145). The emphasis on mastery in judgement is salutary, but because it is manifested in the entire range of ways we operate within our practices, it is not clear why particular Moore-type propositions have a discrete constitute role to play. It could not be that the affirmation of Moore-type propositions alone manifests or constitutes our grasp of the practices; it must somehow be expressive of this grasp. But then what is the distinct constitute or normative role of the propositional items themselves? To be fair to McGinn, when she writes of these propositions that 'our conviction in them is ... properly conceived ... as the immediate exercise of our practical mastery of our techniques for describing the world' (1989, 146), her apparently propositional view begins to look (quite appropriately) non-propositional, her attempted vindication of 'judgments of the frame' like an affirmation that we do what we do.

Like the version Stroll considers, McGinn's account, to the extent that it remains propositional, suffers exposure to sceptical challenge. The special role of hinge propositions guarantees that for them questions of justification do not arise; we are supposed to see this on the basis of 'naturalistic' descriptions of their actual workings. But once particular propositional items have been brought into focus, the sceptic will find that their not being held up for questioning is a mere fact about what we do, and diagnose an appeal to this fact as a sign of dogmatism. That our practices of giving grounds come to an end in the acceptance of propositions that are themselves groundless will seem to him the beginning, and not the end, of the matter. Further, on McGinn's view, holding certain judgements apart from questioning is 'a reflection of our legitimate authority as accredited participants in the practice' (1989, 138). The sceptic will want to ask, 'What, other than participation in the practice, makes our authority legitimate?' The issue may not be a real one, but it is neither addressed nor suppressed by showing that our practices have these rules or that our grasp of them is expressed in the affirmation of these particular propositions. In being forced back to what looks like a direct appeal to our practices (as opposed to the detached,
reflective demonstration of how they are constituted she wants to give), McGinn leaves herself with neither a way of solving this problem nor a means for blocking it.\footnote{4}

The propositional view of hinges remains murky. The deep reason, I suspect, is that it proceeds as if we have a set of Moore-type propositions ready to hand, available for us to ‘hold fast’ in a predetermined set of appropriate contexts. In these circumstances, for some reason, ‘I know’ and ‘I doubt’ just will not combine with Moore’s candidate items. This view appears to invite a challenge from the sceptic, who will think his question of the justification of these propositions is clearer and more intuitive than the account on offer of why ‘I know’ and ‘I doubt’ are inappropriate. It also conceives these propositions as ‘already there’, waiting to be fit into contexts in various ways, a notion which Wittgenstein is most concerned to oppose: We do not, that is, have a grasp on what the relevant proposition is independent of how the words that express it are used in context.\footnote{5}

Are the prospects better for a nonpropositional account of what stands fast? Because he sees that to think of certainty in propositional terms is to run it dangerously close to knowledge for anti-sceptical comfort, Stroll understandably prefers this less intellectualistic, more pragmatic, conception of hinges:

What Wittgenstein takes to be foundational is a picture of the world we all inherit as members of a human community. We have been trained from birth in ways of acting that are non-reflective to accept a picture that is ruthlessly realistic: that there is an earth, persons on it, objects in our environment, and so forth … This picture is manifested in action. When we open a door our lives show that we are certain. Certainty is thus not a matter of reflection about the door but a way of acting with respect to it. (1994, 158)

A sceptically minded philosopher might well urge that it is not at all apparent why (or that) this ‘realistic picture’, which, notice, is presented as a ‘picture that such and such is the case’, does not provide enough propositional content to embroil us in the sceptic’s game. The sceptic will ask what differentiates our acceptance of the picture from implicit adoption of some deep-seated assumptions. One might respond that the view in question is meant merely to show that our commitments to the natural world and the social world cannot be shed wholesale. Certainty, then, might be said to lie in an openness to the world manifest in our practices. There is in a way little to object to here – indeed, in a way the sceptic might agree, insofar as the view gives an accurate description of
our commitments or, as he would say, preconceptions. But we still lack an explanation of why ‘the whole’ cannot be targeted for doubt. Wittgenstein writes: ‘You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life’ (OC 559). Nothing like a demonstration of the meaninglessness of scepticism comes out of this description of ‘the whole’, this much of a non-propositional account of certainty. And Wittgenstein is under no illusion on this score.

As we have seen, on both propositional and non-propositional accounts, questions arise about how what stands fast is to be characterized. To say that certainty lies in individual propositional (or seemingly propositional) items serving, in particular contexts, a role similar to that of rules, invites questions about the criteria for saying that a particular item is actually playing this normative role. To hold that certainty belongs to an entire world view, system or set of practices seems unhelpful to the point of emptiness. Without a way of specifying those parts of the system that anchor it, we are in effect repeating that we go on as we go on. It seems like the propositional story has to be non-propositional, to avoid giving the sceptic’s questions a foothold. On the other hand, the non-propositional account has to be propositional, to locate a distinct role for hinges. On both scores, it is hard to see how the sceptic is quieted. Even barring this worry, we still face a demarcation problem: What lies within the system or practice, subject to whatever terms of epistemic evaluation are proper to it, and what lies at the limits, constituting the conditions of inquiry? Wittgenstein distances himself from the idea that getting precise about such things would settle the matter: ‘There is no sharp boundary between methodological propositions and propositions within a method’ (OC 318).

What stands fast? What are hinges? Perhaps it is an unfounded assumption that there is a determinate class of somethings that must attain this special status. In my view, the tension between the different conceptions of hinges serves throughout the text of On Certainty to destabilize the idea that the relevant language-games have an underlying structure that determines what stands in need of justification and what stands fast without it. Wittgenstein is not offering a theory of hinges that shows the limits of inquiry, thought or language (with the intended consequence that the sceptic shall see that his questions lie beyond the limits). What he does instead is to provide reminders for the purpose of undoing the confusions that lie behind the quest for philosophical accounts of such limits. I turn now to Wittgenstein’s pursuit of this goal.
3. The opening of *On Certainty*

Wittgenstein’s aim in *On Certainty* is *not* to demonstrate that Moore’s common-sense realism and the sceptic’s challenge to it are meaningless. He labours to bring to the fore each party’s underlying commitments and to raise questions about the reasons we might have for accepting or rejecting them. He presents us with a particular narrative – some might say, caricature – of the progress of the debate between Moore and the sceptic. On this story, the sceptic turns out to be confused about the differences between raising doubts about particular claims we make and engaging in some other, not clearly delimited and understood, way of contesting the ostensible foundations of our epistemic practices. The picture of scepticism to which our reading *On Certainty* leads us may seem incomplete, inaccurate or unfair, but, as I have indicated, Wittgenstein’s procedures anticipate this concern: He is striving to create a context in which we will be drawn to give voice to the sceptical moments in our own thinking; and he then wants to force us to account for our sceptical impulses, thus placing a burden on *us* to explain how any sceptical tendencies we may still harbour have been misrepresented.

To create this context, Wittgenstein begins *On Certainty* with a series of remarks about Moore’s use of ‘I know’. Normally, in circumstances in which ‘I know’ makes sense as staking a claim that my evidence and credentials are in order, ‘I doubt’ will make sense too. It is an ‘essential feature’ of the language-game that when ‘I know’ is appropriate, there is a ‘possibility of satisfying oneself’ (OC 3). Moore’s enumerations of the things he takes himself to know are peculiar – it is as if he takes himself to be reporting with the characteristic first-person authority on his mental states (OC 6) – but, of course, that ‘he *does* know remains to be shewn’ (OC 14). What needs to be shown is that on a particular occasion ‘no mistake was possible’ (OC 15); this will have to be ‘established objectively’ (OC 16).

What follows from the inappropriateness of Moore’s uses of ‘I know’? A key point is implicit in the following passage:

‘I know that there’s a sick man lying here’, used in an *unsuitable* situation, seems not to be nonsense but rather seems matter-of-course, only because one can fairly easily imagine a situation to fit it; and one thinks that the words ‘I know that …’ are always in place where there is no doubt, and hence even where the expression of doubt would be unintelligible [*unverständlich*]. (OC 10)
The nonsensicality of Moore’s utterances is not a function of a misfit between pre-existing propositions and their present contexts. Rather, their ‘meaning is not determined by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination’ (OC 348). We should not rush to assign a particular epistemic status to the sentences Moore recites, then, because there are as yet no items to which such a status can meaningfully be assigned. As a result, nothing in Moore’s enumerations determines what showing that he does know would be. On the other hand, we also lack any ‘clear idea’ of what a mistake about any of Moore’s enumerated items would be like (OC 17): A sceptic, in attempting to raise a doubt about them, is under the same obligation as Moore to conceive of and explain what having proper grounds would amount to, ‘how one may know something of the kind’ in question (OC 18).

After considering the proper and improper uses of ‘I know’, Wittgenstein steps back, in OC 19, to reflect on the dialectical situation: In circumstances where we are able to imagine how one may know something of the kind in question (e.g., ‘here is a hand’), ‘the statement “I know that here is a hand” may then be continued: “for it’s my hand that I’m looking at”’. Then a reasonable man will not doubt that I know’ (OC 19). Here the context has been set, and the speaker has taken steps to establish that there is no mistake about it. There is a pause. And then Wittgenstein continues: ‘Nor will the idealist [or the sceptic, see OC 37]; rather he will say that he was not dealing with the practical doubt which is being dismissed, but there is a further doubt behind that one’ (OC 19). The sceptic admits that ‘I know’ is appropriately uttered in the given circumstances. Still, adducing ‘proper grounds’, which have been agreed on as such by those who are ‘acquainted with the language-game’, does not satisfy him about some further thing on his mind, which is expressed just as an ordinary doubt within the language-game would be, but which is somehow different in nature. What are we to make of this ‘further doubt’?

OC 20 ventures a route to a possible answer: ‘“Doubting the existence of the external world” does not mean for example doubting the existence of a planet, which later observations proved to exist.’ This elucidation of what the sceptic wants to target with his doubt brings out its distinctive character while insinuating that his attentions are not exactly directed on the existence of an object called ‘the external world’ at all. If they were, the suggestion is, the sceptic could not insulate his doubt from the ‘practical doubt’ from which he is trying to distinguish it, nor could he block its being resolved in one of the usual and customary ways in which we deal with such matters. But if not knowledge
of the existence of an empirical object, then something about our prac-
tices of advancing, assessing, and doubting claims about such objects, it
seems, is the focus of the sceptic’s scrutiny. That is to say, he questions
whether the language-game within which the notion of ‘proper
grounds’ operates is adequate. But adequate to, or for, what? What issue
about the justification of the practice is the sceptic raising? And why
does he express it in terms of doubt about the existence of the external
world? Doesn’t it sound as though he still seeks the ‘proper grounds’ for
a practice of inquiry without allowing that there could be such grounds?
These questions are not, or not merely, rhetorical. ‘That this [new, non-
practical doubt] is an illusion has to be shewn in a different way’ (OC 19),
Wittgenstein says. He means while it may be taken as a foregone
conclusion that the sceptic’s odd expression of doubt would not oper-
ate in the language-game in the way ‘normal’ or ‘practical’ doubts about
the existence of empirical objects do, this fact settles neither the sense
nor the nonsense of what the sceptic tries to say.

OC 23–24 further elicit the special nature of the sceptic’s doubt. We
recall that there are of course circumstances in which someone might
find a use for saying that he knows he has two hands. Again the con-
text has set the question, and the speaker has taken steps to perform the
relevant investigation. ‘My believing the trustworthy man stems from
my admitting that it is possible for him to make sure. But someone
who’ – like our sceptic – ‘says that perhaps there are no physical objects
makes no such admission’ (OC 23). The thought behind the sceptic’s
reservations needs articulating. It may be, first, that for all we know it is
never possible for the trustworthy man to check thoroughly enough
about the existence of a particular physical object. Or it may be, second,
that the sheer possibility that there are no physical objects is being pon-
dered, in which case the suspicion is that the trustworthy man’s efforts
would be confined to a realm of mere appearances from the very begin-
ning. On this scenario, none of our procedures for making sure would
be relevant to settling the matter of physical objects supposedly at hand.
In either case, the sceptic has in mind some issue about whether it is
ever really possible for him to make sure; ‘[t]he idealist’s [or sceptic’s;
again see OC 37] question would be something like: “What right have
I not to doubt the existence of my hands [or, for that matter, any material
object?]?”’ (OC 24). Wittgenstein’s immediate retort is that ‘someone
who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about
existence only works in a language-game’ (OC 24).

How satisfying is this response? Initial appearances are not promising.
At most it shows that the first alternative above, on which the sceptic is
asking ‘how do you ever know when enough is enough, when you have completed your investigation, met your responsibilities?’ calls for caution, not sceptical suspension of belief. This leaves unaddressed the second, more obscure alternative, on which (notice) the sceptic’s focus is again not on any particular object. The question of ‘What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?’ now has become the issue of the probity of any of my ways of inquiring for telling me anything about the existence of a mind-independent external world. Here, the very notion of making sure has been removed from the contexts that give it life, where the failure to make sure would indeed prompt the withdrawal of one’s knowledge-claims. ‘Hence’, Wittgenstein pronounces pointedly, ‘we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt’ – a doubt, that is, of my right not to doubt – ‘be like?, and don’t understand this straight off’ (OC 24). So once again the question arises: What is the sceptic doing? What is his doubt about my right not to doubt, the comfortable assurance with which I take the world to be present to me in its externality? The ensuing sections investigate what this doubt might amount to; they proceed by asking whether it has been sufficiently clarified by imagining oneself wrong in all particular claims about physical objects.

Right away, OC 25 points to a challenge to the coherence of the sceptic’s doubt: One cannot be wrong in every particular judgement about the world, just as one cannot be wrong in all one’s calculations. (See also OC 54.) Even granting this point, we are not promised anything about when, in which particular circumstances, one will be right or wrong; rather Wittgenstein is urging that if enough comes adrift, what one is doing may no longer count as empirical inquiring or claiming or judging at all. In any case, this idea that one cannot be mistaken in all the particulars is no direct answer to the sceptic. Wittgenstein implicitly supplies him with the following response: Unless we can show that this is one of the circumstances in which freedom from error is assured, we may be wrong. We need a rule from which it can be seen ‘what circumstances logically exclude a mistake’ (OC 26). But any such rule would itself be subject to misuse. Until we reach a level at which we are free from doubt that our rules and procedures have been properly applied, the fact remains we may in any case be mistaken. Thus such rules do not provide the testimony they are designed to deliver – and the sceptic’s suspicion of our practices of inquiry has been made out. On this line of reasoning the sceptic’s doubt has been given a more definite shape, his procedures vindicated. Should we at this point accept his apparently unsatisfiable demand for rules which would show when mistakes are logically excluded?
Wittgenstein agrees that there are no such rules (OC 26–7). In describing our checking procedures, we make reference to actual examples of calculation and judgement. We appeal to nothing except more of the same to show that our checks have been properly executed:

What is ‘learning a rule’? – *This.*

What is ‘making a mistake in applying it’? – *This.* And what is pointed to here is something indeterminate. (OC 28)

Practice in the use of the rule also shews what is a mistake in its employment. (OC 29)

*This* is how calculation is done, in such circumstances a calculation is treated as absolutely reliable, as certainly correct. (OC 39)

… can’t it be described how we satisfy ourselves of the reliability of a calculation? O yes! Yet no rule emerges when we do so. (OC 46)

Now, is Wittgenstein saying, ‘We have learned the game, and THIS [pointing to an exemplary judgement or mistake] shows what it is to play it. One cannot prescind from these particulars and still have any assurance about which game is being played?’ Not only this. When he says that something ‘indeterminate’ lies at the heart of the practice of following a rule, he means that at some point there will be nothing deeper to appeal to in explaining the practice than particular examples of what the proper circumstances and grounds for making a claim are, of what doubts count as real, and of what counts as settling them. And here, he wants to draw a marked contrast between himself and the sceptic. The sceptic feels that the underlying structure of our practices of claiming, doubting and justifying had better be determinate; otherwise it will not be settled once and for all, for all circumstances, whether our ways of proceeding are proper to their intended domains, whether particular possibilities count as real doubts, whether anything is known. If there is such a structure, there will be a question of the extent to which accepted practices measure up to it. It is on the assumption of determinacy that there is a pre-existing fact of the matter to be settled here. Whereas if the practices are ‘indeterminate’ from the ground up – if we take their proper workings not to be hostage to it being settled, prior to our engagement with any of our actual proceedings, what will count as mistake, doubt, justification, etc. – no global question of adequacy of these proceedings has been given a foothold. Wittgenstein later writes:

Doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt.

But since a language-game is something that consists in the recurrent procedures of the game in time, it seems impossible to say in any
individual case that such-and-such must be beyond doubt if there is to be a language-game – though it is right enough to say that as a rule some empirical judgment or other must be beyond doubt. (OC 519)

The absence of a rule for determining where ‘as a rule’ there can be no doubt should not be taken as a ‘gap in the foundations; so that secure understanding is only possible if we first doubt everything that can be doubted, and then remove all these doubts’ (PI 87).

At OC 34 we find a comparison of trusting one’s senses with relying on one’s teachers. That we come to do so selectively, and that our cautions are often well-advised, are hardly grounds for a model of self-reliance that posits distrust of others and of the world as basic. In connection with the observation that there is no rule for determining when we have done ‘enough’ to satisfy ourselves of the reliability of calculations, Wittgenstein observes:

But the most important thing is: The rule is not needed. Nothing is lacking. We do calculate according to a rule, and that is enough. 

This is how one calculates. Calculating is this. Forget this transcendent certainty, which is connected with your concept of spirit. (OC 46–7)⁸

Similarly, it could be said that at bottom Moore and the sceptic share the notion that knowledge has a real, practice-transcendent structure in virtue of which we have the potential for cognitive command that we do, and the layout of which is the subject of their disagreements over the possibility and extent of our knowledge.

Remember that Wittgenstein thinks that in pointing to his hands and saying ‘I know there is a hand here’, Moore is (in his particular context) uttering words to which a definite meaning has not been given (see OC 347–8). What sense might Moore make of these words? It is true that ‘we should not understand’ someone ‘if he were to say “Of course I may be wrong about this” ’ (OC 32, cf. 51). And we could, if we found it useful, assign that sense to Moore’s form of expression – that is, Moore’s ‘I know’ could be conceived as a ‘grammatical proposition’ (OC 58) or a ‘piece of instruction [Belehrung]’ (OC 36) to the effect that there is nothing we would call ‘doubt’ in this case. But adopting this policy would leave a misleading impression, it would not represent a benign extension of the use of ‘know’: It would nurture the confusion that our inability to envision what a mistake would be here represents a step towards establishing that we do know by removing the possibility of error. And then, if we recognize our confusion without understanding its character, we might be tempted
to swing back to scepticism, deciding that after all we don’t know, and that we really can in some sense envision the possibility of wholesale mistake. Wittgenstein wants to put an end to this back and forth: For all we have seen, there is no possibility of error that is waiting to be removed, or that already has been removed, or that remains as a ground for doubt. Better then, Wittgenstein says, to stick with ‘What is it like to make such a mistake as that?’ (OC 32), and to ‘expunge from philosophical language’ (OC 31) these ‘bewitching’ sentences of the form of Moore’s that ‘don’t get us any further’ (OC 33; cf. 350, 467). We get no further, in particular, towards a Moorean realism or a sceptical rejection thereof: ‘I know’ is here a logical insight. Only realism can’t be proved by means of it’ (OC 59).

As we have seen, Wittgenstein alleges that the sceptic’s doubts involve a picture of our practices as constituted by a hidden structure of rules that anticipate all the ways in which our procedures could come to grief, in the absence of which the sceptic will declare them unjustified. The sceptical demand that our practices live up to this picture is, so far, unfounded. We saw that it ensnares the sceptic in a dubious transition from the possibility of doubt in each particular case to the rationality of doubt in every case. But at this point, the sceptic is bound to feel dissatisfied with a response that seems to him actually to appeal to the inherent groundlessness of our practices. His leading questions, ‘But do we know that there are physical objects? Can’t we, after all, quite readily imagine that there are no such things?’ still make sense ‘to him’ (OC 37). We have been through considerations that are supposed to bring out that we have not made sense of being mistaken in every case, but the sceptic still is inclined to think that a simple act of imagination that banishes the external world, wipes clean its externality, suffices to bring out the sense that this possibility makes.

Wittgenstein responds brusquely to the sceptic’s conceit that what he needs in order to clarify his intent is quite simple: ‘But can’t it be imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don’t know. And yet “There are physical objects” is nonsense [Unsinn]’ (OC 35). In OC 36 he glosses this by proposing that ‘no such proposition as “There are physical objects” can be formulated’, but he offers an at best perfunctory explanation of why: ‘A is a physical object’ is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn’t yet understand what “A” means, or what “physical object” means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and “physical object” is a logical concept’ (OC 36). What is going on?

Wittgenstein here continues with his strategy of defamiliarizing the sceptic’s concern. In particular, he is balking at the particular notion that it is easy to see how we could be wrong in all our beliefs about physical
objects, that we need just imagine all objects away while holding our beliefs fixed. Clearly, he wants to say that both Moorean realist and sceptic purport to hold ‘there are physical objects’ up for something like empirical support, while at the same time ruling out the possibility, the very coherence of the idea, of such support prior to the raising of any actual doubts. And his reasons remain as before: If our actual resources for checking and revising our practices of inquiry – one wants to say ‘practical’ or ‘internal’ resources, but this would be misleading, they are the only ones we have – are ruled illegitimate from the outset, more or less by fiat, it will be unclear from what point of view the ostensibly (but dubiously) empirical proposition ‘there are external objects’ can be challenged or supported. It has not been determined what the it that would be challenged or supported would be.

With these points in mind, I want to look at what Wittgenstein says in OC 37 about the status of the rather conclusive-sounding pronouncements I have quoted from OC 35 and 36:

But is it an adequate answer to the scepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that ‘There are physical objects’ is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt [fehlgeganger Versuch] to express what can’t be expressed like that. (OC 37)

I take it that ‘There are physical objects’ is supposed to be a misfiring attempt to express, in effect, ‘what would a mistake here be like? We don’t do anything with that idea here!’ (see OC 32 and 51). This no longer looks, of course, exactly like an assertion about what exists. What the ontologically weighty locution about objects (i.e., ‘There are physical objects’) points to (but what cannot be expressed in this way) is something like a particular feature of the way we go on: This aspect of the language-game (that we talk unhesitatingly about physical objects) is not treated as up for grabs. And if this is so, the sceptic’s challenge seems to evince not the discovery of some unanticipated outcome of the game, but discontent with the game itself! That this is what he is doing is supposed to come as something of a surprise to the sceptic; further, the content of his disappointment remains up in the air.

Still, even if this much ‘can be shewn’, Wittgenstein says, ‘that isn’t the end of the matter’ (OC 37). Why not? Because, he adds, we may not have hit off a correct understanding of the difficulty with the sceptic’s words. It may not be readily discernible, after all, what recommends a form of words to someone, or why he would want to spurn it. Nor is it
settled that there is nothing that the realist or sceptic could do to give a healthy sense to his misfiring words. Nothing fixes beforehand what uses might be found for a form of words. Further examination of what might push the sceptic into his particular stance with respect to our ways of talking and how his attitude might come into words will comprise the ongoing progress of Wittgenstein’s dialectic.

I have claimed that in the early pages of On Certainty, Wittgenstein wrests from the sceptic an acknowledgement first, that his questions are less natural than they appear, and second, that he is challenging something like my right to my practices – a peculiar point of view for someone whose self-image is that of the methodologically cautious practitioner. The text traces a process of description and reminder, followed by moments in which the philosopher responds by attempting to explain his stance, followed by further reminders that make the philosopher’s words seem like indirect expressions of distrust. Here is one more such reminder: ‘When one says: “Perhaps this planet doesn’t exist and the light-phenomenon arises in some other way”, then after all one needs an example of an object which does exist. This doesn’t exist, – as for example does …’ (OC 56). This represents neither a paradigm case argument nor just a grammatical argument that all doubts must be in principle resolvable. Wittgenstein is, if I am correct, trying to get the sceptic to explain why, if his doubts are at least in principle resolvable, they could not even in principle be resolved by ordinary means, and why if, on the other hand, they are not resolvable by these means, they really exemplify the faithful reliance on our practices of inquiry that represents at least a fair piece of the sceptic’s self-conception.

More simply, Wittgenstein is asking the sceptic, once more, to motivate his refusal to give authority to examples. ‘Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself’ (OC 139). The sceptic will not let the practice speak for itself, because he allows nothing (and in the end, no one) to stand as exemplary of its procedures. When Wittgenstein says that here ‘[d]oubt gradually loses its sense. This language-game just is like that’ (OC 56) he is not taking himself to be showing that the procedures we use are justified, as if removing a suspicion; he is saying that no doubt has yet been afforded a sense.

4. Conclusion: rules and scepticism

In the context of discussing where there is a need for rules to determine the application of rules, the Wittgenstein of Philosophical Investigations
points out that the imaginability of a doubt about how a rule is to be followed does not amount to a real doubt. He goes on to say that the mere possibility of misunderstanding is not something that a real explanation must remove (PI 87). The tendency to think otherwise rests on a preconceived notion of how rules must operate if they genuinely fix the unique way we are to go on. Here, the underlying meaning of a rule is a structure (to which our actual use of the rule may only approximate) that settles for all possible circumstances how it is to be followed. This picture has the sign reaching out to the world independently of us, of our normal responses, uptakes and judgements. It can be countered, though not dispelled, by noting that the ‘sign-post is in order – if, under normal circumstances, it fulfils its purposes’ (PI 87).

Something similar seems to fit the external world sceptic’s picture of doubt and belief. The structure of knowledge is to determine what is really up for doubt, and the sceptic tries to be true to what that structure determines. His specific way of doing so – taking every imaginable doubt to count as real – is only one among others, but given the setup of his investigation, it is perhaps the most natural: Any other way of attempting to carve the structure of knowledge at nature’s joints will run into intractable problems about rules for interpreting rules for determining whether particular doubts are, in context, apt. By taking any imaginable doubt to be a real doubt – by apparently adopting a policy of maximum caution – the sceptic may seem to avoid this particular quagmire. But why think that what is really doubtful must be settled beforehand? Why, that there must be a determinate way of assigning an intrinsic epistemic status to each proposition on the basis of its meaning? Why, that our concepts must work this way? Wittgenstein presents the sceptic as driven less by a scrupulous application of epistemic concepts than by a picture of our practices of inquiry as constituted by a hidden structure of rules that anticipates all the ways our procedures could come to grief, in the absence of which the sceptic will declare them unjustified. But his demand that our concepts live up to this picture is a fantasy.11

In Investigations 201, Wittgenstein argues that there is a way of understanding a rule which is not interpreting it, but which is exhibited in particular judgements about what counts as accord and disagreement with it from case to case. Without this way of understanding, a rule-following sceptic’s talk of divergent interpretations of rules does not get off the ground. With it, however, the rule-following sceptic has to acquiesce in the practices about the normativity of which he is trying to raise a general question.12 Here is a parallel for the case of the external world: There is a way of orienting oneself to the world that is not a matter of believing
that it is some particular way or another. Unless there is some such acceptance – and ‘[m]y life consists in my being content to accept many things’ (OC 344) – there is no understanding the possible doubts on which the sceptic trades. The mere possibility of mistake is like the mere possibility of divergent interpretation. When a particular mistake is at issue, we try to address it by using the explanations and evidence we have at hand, without guarantee of success. The possibility that we shall fail, or this possibility combined with the fact that further explanations may be misinterpreted, procedures misapplied, or bits of evidence called into question, does not prompt global, world-shattering doubt. That is: ‘A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt’ (OC 450); the ‘absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language-game’ (OC 370). The sceptic has to try to maintain a stance within the practice he is questioning in order to express a definite doubt; he has to annul this stance to reach his radical conclusion.

When we persist in looking for a demonstration that the sceptic’s question is meaningless, the sceptic keeps getting a foothold.13 We cannot have something that we think we want, a way of giving an explanation based in the ‘logic’ of knowledge, justification and doubt of why the ‘basic beliefs’ that comprise our ‘world picture’ do not stand in need of grounding. This conclusion may sound like what the sceptic had been saying all along. Wittgenstein, after all, speaks of ‘the groundlessness of our believing’ (OC 166), of the ‘comfortable’ but ‘animal’ certainty of our ‘form of life’ (OC 357–9; cf. 559). Still, the sceptic depicts our situation as one of confinement, and in this portrayal lies distortion. To see our practices as wanting a global justification is to think of them as comprising a fixed whole within which we operate. We want to step outside of our skins; we are dissatisfied with our practices because they depend on us.

5. Addendum: on truth – some things *On Certainty* says about truth

Whether a proposition can turn out false after all depends on what I make count as determinants for that proposition. (OC 5)

... we must first determine the role of deciding for or against a proposition. (OC 198)

The reason why the use of the expression ‘true or false’ has something misleading about it is that it is like saying ‘it tallies with the facts or it doesn’t’ [es stimmt mit den Tatsachen überein
oder nicht], and the very thing that is in question is what ‘tallying’ [Übereinstimmung, agreement] is here. (OC 199)

Really ‘The proposition is either true or false’ only means that it must be possible to decide for or against it. But this does not say what the ground for such a decision is like. (OC 200)

If everything speaks for an hypothesis and nothing against it, is it objectively certain? One can call it that. But does it necessarily agree with the world of facts? At very best it shows us what ‘agreement’ [Übereinstimmung] means. We find it difficult to imagine it to be false, but also difficult to make use of it. (OC 203)

If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false. (OC 205)

Here we see that the idea of ‘agreement with reality’ does not have any clear application. (OC 215)

It is not uncommon to read these passages and their kin as rejecting a full-blooded notion of truth as correspondence with reality, and to take this rejection as committing Wittgenstein to a form of linguistic idealism, on which what can be meaningfully assessed as true or false is limited by the norms and rules of our language-games. In a representative article, Michael Kober holds that this linguistic idealism cannot begin to address a global scepticism that questions whether we know anything at all, whether we have a right to our practices of inquiry in the first place. The allegedly Wittgensteinian position, in restricting the field of the meaningful to the practical realm, allows for the very ‘gap between the World or Reality and our talk about it’ that the sceptic would exploit (Kober 1996, 438). If the truth-conditions of our assertions are determined by features of our language-games, and if participation in and even the constitution of these practices are in some sense ‘up to us’, the sceptical question of whether the resources of which these games avail us are sufficient to the task of mirroring rather than interpreting Reality appears quite intelligible, and quite pressing.

But what question, exactly, is this? Practically everything in the linguistic idealist view, including its attribution to Wittgenstein, is misleading. The notion that Wittgenstein’s descriptions of our linguistic practices allow for a gap between the world and us – the idea that facts about us, as opposed to facts about the world, determine the meaning of our utterances – is already prejudicial. Wittgenstein depicts language-games and the ways we shape them as part of the world. Further, the passages about truth quoted above say nothing more than that what
correspondence to reality comes to in a given case will have to be ascertained; the implication is that neither the sceptic nor Moore uses his words in circumstances in which it is fixed what agreement with reality will be: ‘Their meaning is not determined by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination’ (OC 348). Finally, on my reading, the sceptic has not uncovered a wholesale gap between the world and our means of representing it. Being hooked to the world is our fate, our condition of intelligibility; speaking the truth about it, our responsibility. There is, naturally, the possibility of thinking and speaking falsely, as well as all kinds of ways in which our words and thoughts may break down. But none of this shows that our responsiveness to the world as embodied in our practices of thinking and speaking about it is lacking in proper epistemic credentials. Once again, insofar as he thinks otherwise, the sceptic resists his own condition and chafes against language.15

Notes

3. In Chapter 7 of *Moore and Wittgenstein On Certainty*, Stroll correctly identifies and usefully discusses OC 35–37 and OC 54–59 as a key argument in Wittgenstein’s criticism of Moore and his idealist and sceptical antagonists. The present paper attempts primarily to work out the backdrop to this argument, the dialectic into which it fits.
5. As is suggested by, for example, OC 347–9.
6. In her helpful paper, ‘Wittgenstein, Kant, and the “metaphysics of experience”’, Meredith Williams argues that for Wittgenstein, ‘the philosophical search for limits is senseless’ (in Williams 1999, 63). Williams sees certainty as a feature of practices that shows up in what we find acceptable and unacceptable within them; she does not intend this to provide a non-propositional account of hinges. This is as it should be; the certainties that show up in the particulars of a practice cannot, in my view, be described or accounted for in independent terms.
7. On Wittgenstein’s conception of nonsense and its role in *On Certainty*, and for some remarks on OC 10 in particular, see Conant (1998).
8. The suggestion is this: just as we would seek a rule that makes apparent in what circumstances a mistake in calculation remains possible, or would perceive a lack or gap in the absence of such a rule, so Moore and the sceptic seem to express discomfort in the absence of grounds for our practices, in the ‘groundlessness of our believing’, finding that our cognitive command
extends only to that which, on reflection, can be made transparent to us irrespective of the particularities of context or situation.


10. Wittgenstein rejects the sort of paradigm case argument that would be in play in OC 628. Stroll, highlighting the inadequacies of an appeal to paradigms here, takes Wittgenstein to be arguing that genuine doubts are in principle resolvable (1994, 111).

11. See: ‘When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change’ (OC 65); ‘If we imagine the facts otherwise than as they are, certain language-games lose some of their importance’ (OC 63). This kind of talk should not feed scepticism; should not, that is, lead us to assume that a lack of anticipation of all the factors that might affect the viability or usefulness or interest of our practices represents their failure adequately to provide a foundation for the uses that they do have.

12. On PI 201 and the rule-following sceptic, see Minar (1994).

13. Here, I am in agreement with Graciella de Pierris (1996) that Wittgenstein’s main purpose is not to refute the sceptic, but to clarify the relation between everyday and philosophical perspectives. I am more sanguine than she, however, about the prospect of making out a criticism of the sceptic’s attempt to occupy a distinctive reflective point of view. Wittgenstein, on my view, at least renders obscure the sceptic’s entitlement to use (ordinary) words as he does, his success in meaning what he wants.

14. Kober (1996). Both Kober and Wolfgang Carl who, in (Carl 1995), advances some related criticisms of Wittgenstein’s alleged failure to address an ‘external’ question that the sceptic makes pertinent, could be seen as beginning with the idea that the sceptic must be refuted. As I hope I have made clear, this is a distortion of Wittgenstein’s intent and is bound, in his eyes, to fail.

15. An ancestor of this paper was presented under the title ‘How to Read On Certainty’ at ‘The Analytic Tradition: A Tribute to Burton Dreben’, a symposium sponsored by the Boston University Center for Philosophy and History of Science, the Harvard University Philosophy Department, and the Blossom Fund. I am grateful to the audience at the symposium, and in particular to Juliet Floyd, Warren Goldfarb, and Richard Moran, for comments and encouragement.
Granted the intuitive pervasiveness of something that may express itself as a moral or religious demand in the *Investigations*, the demand is not the subject of a separate study, call it Ethics. It is as if the necessities of life and culture depicted in the *Investigations* are beyond the reach of what we think of as moral judgment.

Stanley Cavell (1989, 40)

This chapter may seem to be in the perilous position of lacking a subject-matter. ‘What does Wittgenstein have to teach us about ethics?’ someone might well ask. Certainly Wittgenstein never offers a separate philosophical treatment of ethics in the way in which he offers such treatments of, say, logic, mathematics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of psychology and so on. Moreover, although there are many remarks, sprinkled throughout his writings, which it is natural to describe as broaching ethical topics, it doesn’t seem reasonable to construe these remarks, even considered all together, as achieving the status of a serious contribution to ethics – or at least not as long as ethics is conceived, along familiar philosophical lines, as a discipline concerned with a particular ‘region’ of discourse. After all, in a fair number of these remarks, Wittgenstein invites us – in a manner that seems to fly in the face of a philosophically familiar conception of ethics – to think of the ethical as a dimension of all our modes of thought and talk. And in others, he invites us – in a manner that seems at least detached from such a conception – to think of the interest and difficulty of philosophy as he practises it in ethical terms.¹

A central contention of this chapter is that Wittgenstein’s failure to make a traditional contribution to ethics is an indication, not of disengagement
from ethical concerns, but of an unorthodox understanding of what such concerns are like. A second contention is that in order to grasp what is distinctive and, indeed, also valuable about his understanding of these matters we need to respect the irregular form in which he expresses it. Wittgenstein makes many of his most explicit remarks on ‘ethical topics’ in the midst of – and often at least apparently as a sort of commentary on – his philosophical investigations of other (seemingly non-ethical) topics. It appears to follow that if we are to appreciate the force of the remarks, we should consider them, not in isolation, but together with some of the philosophical preoccupations that, as it seems, first occasion them.2

Taking my cue from this suggestion, I propose to adopt as an initial focus in this chapter, not those passages in Wittgenstein’s writings it seems most natural to describe as raising ethical questions, but rather things Wittgenstein – and in particular the later Wittgenstein – says about meaning. More specifically, I will proceed by, first, critically examining a prevalent interpretation of Wittgenstein’s later view of meaning that has taken conversations about ‘Wittgenstein and ethics’ in an unhelpful direction and, then, returning to questions of ethics via what I regard as a more faithful interpretation. Throughout, I will take Wittgenstein’s remarks in On Certainty as my main example.3

1. Introduction: the standard view of the bearing of Wittgenstein’s philosophy on ethics

‘So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?’ – It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. (PI 241)

It is a prominent theme in recent analytic philosophy of language that a good understanding of the meaning of linguistic expressions is not possible apart from attention to their public use. Many philosophers have argued that we should supplement our semantic and syntactic theories with some kind of pragmatics of natural language – say, a theory of ‘speech acts’ or ‘conversational implicatures’. And some have proposed to construe the later Wittgenstein’s characteristic emphasis on the use we make of expressions as indicating an interest in an argument along the same basic lines.

Within this context, it is often suggested that Wittgenstein repudiates a classical theory of meaning on which our use of particular expressions is in some sense a consequence of the meanings the expressions already
possess in favour of (what is sometimes called) a ‘use-theory of meaning’ – that is, a theory on which our manner of using expressions in some sense constitutes their meanings. Further, Wittgenstein is taken to be pointing out that it follows from the thought, internal to a use-theory, that the public practices to which an expression is tied fix its meaning, that those practices determine what kinds of things can, and what kinds of things cannot, coherently be said with the expression. What emerges is a familiar image of Wittgenstein as maintaining that investigations of how we use expressions establish the bounds of sense by revealing regularities or rules in accordance with which linguistic acts must be performed in order to be fully intelligible.

Some of the philosophical interest excited by this image of Wittgenstein has to do with the fact that the kind of use-theory of meaning that animates it appears to undercut the possibility of critical scrutiny of our linguistic practices. The theory can be developed so that it represents the meanings of terms for even our most basic epistemic or critical concepts as fixed by linguistic conventions. Thus extended, the theory represents our linguistic practices as immune to (what might be thought of as) ‘external’ forms of criticism – forms that endeavour to round on our linguistic practices and supply them with rational foundations. Very roughly the problem is that, insofar as these criticisms are intended to question even received critical practices, a demand to employ critical locutions in irregular and hence (by the lights of a use-theory of meaning) also unsuitable circumstances appears to be internal to their aspirations. The result is that the very nature of such critical efforts seems to force us into a peculiar type of unintelligibility. We seem to be knocking up against a limit imposed by the structure of language – one that we would have to transgress if, per impossibile, we were to show that our linguistic practices are (or are not) rationally defensible. Admittedly this doesn’t prevent us from offering rational criticisms of language where we can do so without flouting established critical practices. Nevertheless, even though ‘internal’ forms of criticism (as we might think of them) remain within reach, external forms are prohibited. Our linguistic practices are immune to rational criticism, or inviolable.

Interpretations that proceed along these lines – hereafter ‘inviolability interpretations’ – are often extended so that they seem to support some form of cultural relativism. What suggests the extension is the thought that, in developing what is alleged to be a use-theory of meaning, Wittgenstein leaves room for the possibility of communities of speakers who have both very different linguistic practices and, by the same token, also very different critical standards. The idea is that when we
encounter members of such communities we are not justified in regard-
ning the distances that separate us as disagreements subject to rational
resolution. In addition to being unable to critically survey our own
linguistic practices, we are unable to demonstrate that our practices are
rationally superior (or inferior) to those of others. Our hopes for con-
vergence must accordingly be vested, not in techniques of reason, but
in efforts to effect ‘conversions’ using non-rational methods.⁷

Without regard to whether they are taken to underwrite this form of
relativism, inviolability interpretations are the common denominator of
most discussions about Wittgenstein and ethics. These discussions,
which date back to the first reception of Wittgenstein’s later thought,
typically take the form of debates about the consequences of the
allegedly Wittgensteinian view that our ways of thinking and speaking
are inviolable. Some of the most outspoken commentators who ascribe
this view to Wittgenstein and, in addition, also take an interest in its
ethical implications insist that the view is inseparable from a form of
ethical conservatism. The members of this group of commentators
(which includes not only critics such as Bertrand Russell, Ernst Gellner
and, more recently, Onora O’Neill but also fans such as David Bloor and
J.C. Nyíri) trace the view’s supposedly conservative character to what
they see as its tendency to deprive us of resources required for making
sense of calls for rational improvements in our current modes of
thought and speech. Many of them also represent the pertinent form of
conservatism as tied to the species of relativism just described – on
which our alleged inability to critically scrutinize our own practices
leaves us incapable of comparing (what we might have thought of as)
their rational credentials with those of the practices of others. The larger
suggestion of these commentators is that Wittgenstein should be under-
stood as maintaining that the only way for us to live consistently is to
find a way to live within our current practices – while perhaps also with-
holding criticism of the practices of others.

Not everyone who reads Wittgenstein along inviolability lines
believes that the result is an image of him as a conservative thinker.
A small number of such readers have wanted to rebuff the suggestion of
‘Wittgenstein’s conservatism’. These readers argue that Wittgenstein
leaves room for the possibility of agitating for even radical changes in
our linguistic practices. Their guiding thought is that, insofar as
Wittgenstein represents efforts to transform our practices as unham-
pered by our current critical resources, he effectively maintains that we
can bring about changes inconceivable from within those practices
simply by getting our fellow speakers to pick up new linguistic habits.⁸
It’s no part of my project in this chapter to enter into the details of, or try to arbitrate, this dispute about the implications of the allegedly Wittgensteinian view that our linguistic practices are inviolable. My initial goal in what follows is to challenge the assumption, responsible for whatever appearance of pertinence the dispute possesses, that Wittgenstein sympathizes with such a view. Although passages in which Wittgenstein refers questions about meaning to a study of our public linguistic techniques may at first seem to provide support for the sort of use-theory of meaning distinctive of inviolability interpretations,9 a more careful study reveals that he has no interest in such a theory. Nor is his lack of interest merely a matter of (what a number of writers have disparaged as) a ‘quietistic’ reluctance to advance theoretical claims which he nevertheless requires to underwrite his explicit philosophical commitments.10 Wittgenstein is in fact directly hostile to the tenets of a use-theory of meaning, and his hostility extends to the theory’s tendency to block criticism. My larger goal below is to show that his view of meaning is significantly more foreign to recent philosophy of language than the sorts of pragmatic theories to which the suggestion of a use-theory assimilates it and, further, that unless we adequately weigh its foreignness, we are bound to obscure the character and interest of his ethical concerns.

2. On Certainty (I): ‘the inviolability of framework judgements’

Wittgenstein’s own view ... is that we should ... recognize how very specialized the use of ‘I know’ is ... that is to say, that its use is restricted to propositions that are advanced within the framework of judgments which together constitute our view of the world.

Marie McGinn (1989, 119)

Setting aside these larger issues for the moment, we can justly say that a prevailing tendency among commentators on Wittgenstein’s later philosophy – without regard to whether they are specifically interested in questions about ethics – is to think that Wittgenstein is committed to some version of an inviolability view. Further, we can justly say that this tendency is especially marked in connection with On Certainty. Some of the most widely received accounts of On Certainty’s preoccupations both ascribe to its author a use-theory of meaning and also suggest that the larger project for which he employs it is arguing that our own (and perhaps also others’) linguistic practices are immune to rational
Given that On Certainty is often taken to speak especially strongly for some sort of inviolability interpretation, it follows that it represents a particularly good test case for a challenge to such an interpretation.

What lies in the background of Wittgenstein’s remarks here is, famously, a couple of G.E. Moore’s attempts to formulate a refutation of scepticism about the existence of the external world. Moore’s most notorious procedure – the centrepiece of his ‘Proof of an External World’ (1939) – involved placing himself in an epistemically optimal position for observing some standard object, such as his own hand or a tree, and then coming out with ‘I know this is a hand’ or ‘I know that is a tree.’

A second procedure – the crux of ‘A Defence of Common Sense’ (1925) – involved listing sentences Moore took to express unquestionably true, or ‘commonsensical’, empirical propositions (such as, e.g., ‘[My body has always been] either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth’; ‘The earth had existed for many years before my body was born’; etc.) and then insisting that we can arrive at instances of knowledge by prefixing ‘I know’ to each sentence. Wittgenstein’s remarks in On Certainty start from objections to both procedures – objections he frequently summarizes by charging that the types of utterances that preoccupy Moore (as well as the sceptic) are meaningless or nonsense.

This charge is most often construed as a direct expression of a use-theory of meaning. Moreover, it seems undeniable that there are remarks in On Certainty that, at least taken in isolation, can plausibly be represented as supporting such a construal. In this text, as elsewhere, Wittgenstein is clearly concerned to emphasize the importance, within philosophical investigations of the meanings of particular expressions, of attending to how the pertinent expressions are used (e.g., OC 61). He also clearly traces what he sees as Moore’s and the sceptic’s lapses into nonsense to a failure to attend properly to uses of ‘I know’ (e.g., OC 6). And he tries to address this failure by describing circumstances in which we ordinarily advance claims to know. What are in question are, Wittgenstein tells us, circumstances in which there is room for doubt (e.g., OC 2 and 4); in which error is intelligible (e.g., OC 66 and 74); in which there is a question of saying something informative (e.g., OC 468) and so on. At first glance these different textual observations may seem to support the conclusion – drawn by many readers – that Wittgenstein’s criticism of Moore is appropriately spelled out in terms of a use-theory of meaning. The familiar suggestion is that Wittgenstein thinks Moore cannot intelligibly assert the kind of thing he wants to say he knows because it is impossible to advance a claim to know that kind
of thing within the circumstances in which we ordinarily advance claims to know (i.e., circumstances in which there is room for doubt, in which error is intelligible, etc.).

To the extent that it is thus spelled out in terms of a use-theory, Wittgenstein’s charge of nonsense appears to depend for its force on the identification of some sort of misfit between – to use Wittgenstein’s German – the Sätze to which Moore wants to prefix ‘I know’ and the circumstances in which we ordinarily advance knowledge-claims. Since ‘Sätze’ can be used to mean either sentences (i.e., merely grammatical entities) or propositions (i.e., entities that are as such in the business of expressing thoughts), it is important to note that, in order to capture the nature of the alleged misfit, we need to understand Wittgenstein’s remarks about Moore’s Sätze as remarks about propositions, and not sentences. For it is only in virtue of our grasp of the nature of the propositions or judgements allegedly in question – they are, we are told, propositions about which there can be no doubt, no question of error, and so on – that we are supposed to be able to recognize that we are no longer dealing with circumstances in which we ordinarily claim to know things. So, as it gets analysed here, Wittgenstein’s charge of nonsense appears to amount to the charge that Moore slides into unintelligibility when he tries to assert his knowledge of certain independently proposition-expressing – or independently meaningful – combinations of words.

This allegedly Wittgensteinian mode of criticism lends itself relatively neatly to being captured in terms of a familiar Gricean distinction between, on the one hand, ‘sentence-meaning’ (spelled out in terms of both the meanings of the individual words of which a sentence is composed and the rules of the language) and, on the other, ‘speaker-meaning’ (spelled out in terms of the practical, human point of coming out with a meaningful sentence). Wittgenstein’s objection to Moore, as it is understood here, can be described as concerned exclusively with the latter of these two Gricean categories of meaning. It has to do with the alleged impossibility of figuring out what intelligible point Moore might be making in asserting that he knows certain independently meaningful sentences.

If it is right to represent Wittgenstein’s critique of Moore, in a manner that thus suggests a Gricean category of speaker-meaning, as grounded in a use-theory of meaning, then, as we just saw, it must be the case that the many remarks in which Wittgenstein discusses Sätze to which Moore prefixes ‘I know’ are properly understood as remarks not about sentences but about propositions. And at this point it might appear that we encounter powerful evidence in favour of ascribing a use-theory to Wittgenstein.
While it is clear that Wittgenstein is critical of Moore's anti-sceptical procedures, it is no less clear that his critical engagement is at bottom driven by a measure of real admiration. Wittgenstein takes Moore's ‘Defence of Common Sense’ to contain an important insight. What Wittgenstein finds compelling is Moore's idea that certain empirical judgements play a special role in our modes of thought and speech. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein returns again and again to different expressions of this idea. He talks about empirical propositions [*Erfahrungssätze*] and judgements [*Urteile*] which ‘stand fast for us’, or which are ‘like the axis around which a body rotates’ (e.g., OC 151–3); he compares the role certain empirical propositions play in our language to the stable but not permanent channels in a river-bed (OC 96); and he tells us that these propositions are like ‘hinges’ on which our various questions, doubts, investigations, etc. turn (OC 341–3).

Insofar as these passages seem to support an understanding of remarks in which Wittgenstein talks about the *Sätze* to which Moore prefixes ‘I know’ as remarks about a special set of empirical propositions, they may be – and, indeed, often are – taken to speak for attributing a use-theory of meaning to Wittgenstein. Further, insofar as they are taken to speak for attributing such a theory to Wittgenstein, they may be – and, indeed, often are – taken to speak directly for reading all of *On Certainty* along inviolability lines. The pertinent passages represent some empirical judgements as fundamental for our linguistic practices. So to the extent that Wittgenstein is taken to be arguing, in accordance with a use-theory, that it is impossible to question, doubt, investigate, advance knowledge-claims about and so on certain judgements, and to the extent that he is also taken to be referring to precisely these judgements (viz., those that are fundamental for our linguistic practices), he appears to hold the view that there is a significant respect in which our linguistic practices are immune to rational scrutiny.

This gives us a rough sketch of the sort of inviolability interpretation that gets traced out within some of the most influential accounts of *On Certainty*. For a clear and *prima facie* plausible version of such an interpretation, we might turn to Marie McGinn's 1989 book *Sense and Certainty*. According to the interpretation McGinn develops here, Wittgenstein's main ambition in *On Certainty* is to show both that Moore's anti-sceptical procedures isolate a class of judgements that play a special, framing role in our language-game and, in addition, that there can be no question of standing in epistemic relations to these judgements. The pertinent judgements might be thought of as
composing, she writes:

... the completely unquestioned background against which all enquiry, description of the world, confirmation and disconfirmation of belief, etc., goes on: they are all the judgments that are either ‘flamingly obvious’ or which may be spoken with authority, which will be accepted without doubt, and which may be taken for granted in the justifications that we give for the knowledge claims or more interesting judgments we advance. (1989, 103)

On McGinn’s reading, a central concern of *On Certainty* is showing that these ‘framework judgments’ (as she calls them) can’t be made to fit with the circumstances in which we ordinarily advance knowledge-claims,17 or, in her words, that ‘there is an implication carried by the use of “I know” that cannot be met by claims involving [these judgments]’ (1989, 106). McGinn argues – in a manner that presupposes some version of a use-theory – that Wittgenstein’s criticism of Moore turns for its force on the identification of just this sort of misfit. The alleged problem is that, as a result of the misfit, it is unclear what intelligible human point Moore might be making in trying to say that he has knowledge of certain ‘framework judgments’ (1989, 85–6). McGinn thus invites us to understand Wittgenstein as championing the view that the judgements that make up the ‘framework’ of our language cannot be submitted to rational scrutiny. She describes a full-blown inviolability interpretation of *On Certainty* on which the book’s central intended moral is, as she puts it, that the application of all ‘questions of evidence and justification’ (1989, 120) is ‘restricted to propositions that are advanced within the framework of judgments which together constitute our view of the world’ (1989, 119). 18

McGinn does not address the question of whether her interpretation has relativistic implications. But other readers have gone on from similar interpretations to attribute to Wittgenstein various forms of cultural relativism. The passages from *On Certainty* that typically get accented in this context contain descriptions – they are in every case highly schematic ones – of encounters between people with very different world-views. Thus, to mention some central remarks, we are asked to envision ourselves confronted with people who consult oracles instead of physics (OC 609) and also with people who believe that human beings sometimes go to the moon (OC 106, 108);19 and we are invited to imagine Moore disputing with a king who is brought up to believe the world started with him (OC 92). In his commentary on these
encounters, Wittgenstein tells us that although we may ‘convert’ others to our way of thinking, ‘it [will] be a conversion of a special kind’ (OC 92). And he adds that, in contrast to what we may be inclined to assume, we are sometimes forced to pin our hopes for cross-cultural understanding not on reasons or proofs but on methods designed to shape our own or others’ responses – that is, on what he calls methods of ‘persuasion’ (OC 262, 612, 669).

I want to emphasize that it is not written into these remarks that they express a relativistic outlook. The remarks only seem to express such an outlook given the assumption that the persuasive methods Wittgenstein mentions here are properly understood as non-rational modes of communication. This assumption, in turn, seems reasonable if we take it for granted that Wittgenstein is maintaining, in accordance with an inviolability interpretation, that ‘framework judgments’ are immune to rational assessment – and if we take it for granted, further, that he is suggesting that different linguistic communities may have different sets of such judgements. Against this background, it seems natural to suppose that what Wittgenstein is doing in his remarks on cross-cultural encounters is describing a relativistic creed on which it is impossible to overcome divergences between members of different linguistic communities by rational means, and on which we should therefore place our hopes for convergence in the application of merely persuasive, non-rational methods. Nevertheless, since an inviolability approach is built into the background that makes this supposition seem natural, it follows that there is a sense in which an account of Wittgenstein as a relativist stands or falls with such an approach. This brings me to my next topic.

3. On Certainty (II): meaning, judgement and limits of sense

Instead of saying that Moore’s statement ‘I know that this is a tree’ is a misuse of language, it is better to say that it has no clear meaning, and that Moore himself doesn’t know how he is using it.

Wittgenstein, in conversation with Malcolm (1984, 72)

If not in accordance with the sort of inviolability interpretation that McGinn and others describe, how should we understand Wittgenstein’s charge that Moore’s utterances are meaningless? According to inviolability interpretations, when Wittgenstein speaks of nonsense in connection with Moore’s utterances of ‘I know that such-and-such’, he is identifying
a problem not with what ‘such-and-such’ expresses, but rather with
Moore’s efforts to assert that; he is complaining that there is no way for
Moore to get his claim to know the particular judgements in question
to dovetail with the circumstances in which we ordinarily say we know
things. A signal defect of this interpretative approach is that it places
philosophical weight on a distinction between kinds of meaninglessness
which is one of Wittgenstein’s central critical targets. McGinn, for
instance, assumes that Wittgenstein is primarily concerned with a type
of nonsense that afflicts judgements (or independently meaningful
sentences) when used in unsuitable circumstances and, further, that he
brackets questions about a type of nonsense that occurs at the level of
the sentence. She by and large reserves talk of ‘unintelligibility’ for the
former (and, by her lights, textually more significant) type of nonsense,
and speaks of ‘meaninglessness’ and ‘failures of sense’ in connection
with the latter. Thus she writes:

[T]he attempt to show that the knowledge claims that the philosopher
investigates are illegitimate or unintelligible is thus an attempt to show,
not that the words that the philosopher utters in introducing these
claims are themselves meaningless, but that, given the context in
which he utters them, we cannot see what he means by them, we
cannot construe his utterance of them as an intelligible act of assertion.
(1989, 85)21

Abstracting for the moment from the question of whether it is possible
to defend McGinn’s distinction between two types of nonsense (i.e., mean-
inglessness and unintelligibility), it is worth stressing that there is in any
case no trace of it in On Certainty. Wittgenstein uses ‘unintelligible’
[unverständlich] only once, and even in this one case he employs it in a
context in which he elsewhere talks about things being ‘nonsense’
[Unsinn or unsinnig] or, alternately, ‘failing to make sense’ [keinen Sinn
haben].22 His attitude towards these terms is, quite plainly, that they are
interchangeable.

This is not a matter of sloppiness. Wittgenstein is happy to use these
terms interchangeably because he wants to collapse the very distinction
between kinds of meaninglessness that McGinn’s more specialized
terminology serves to mark. When Wittgenstein declares that Moore-
type utterances are nonsense, he is not suggesting that the utterances
involve judgements such that no claim to know them can be squared
with the conditions of knowledge. He is suggesting instead that it is not
clear what judgements are at issue at all. For instance, he occasionally
glosses his references to Moore’s Sätze as references to his words23 and,
in doing so, invites us to greet his interest in these Sätze as interest— not in items that already possess a determinate logical character (i.e., judgments or propositions), but—in items that can only be characterized in grammatical terms. He thus expresses sympathy for the view that, until we understand what intelligible act of speech Moore is performing with his sentences, we are not yet in a position to say what those sentences mean (even though, as Wittgenstein puts it, they are ‘extremely simple sentence[s] of the most ordinary kind’ (OC 347) and we ‘can fairly easily imagine a situation to fit’ them (OC 10)).

Wittgenstein’s attitude is in these respects consistent with things he himself says, in both his early and later writings, about the limits of sense. Wittgenstein repeatedly says things to the effect that logic is internal to (or constitutive of) thought, and that there is therefore no such thing as recognizing something both as a thought and as lacking logical structure. He develops this view by attacking the suggestion that a combination of signs, or an utterance, might fail to make sense because of what it—in virtue of what we might confusedly slide into thinking of as its ‘illogical logic’—tries but fails to convey. In the Tractatus, he puts it this way: ‘We cannot think anything illogical for then we would have to think illogically’ (TLP 3.03). In later writings, Wittgenstein’s approach to these issues is inflected by the way in which he takes context to contribute to the content or logical character of an utterance. Now Wittgenstein expresses his hostility to the notion of ‘illogical thought’ by suggesting that there is no such thing as a linguistically impermissible move in a ‘language-game’. He attempts to distance himself from the idea of a combination of words-and-context that fails to make sense because of what it—in virtue of what we might confusedly slide into thinking of as its ‘senseless sense’—tries but fails to convey.

What is unsatisfactory about the roughly Gricean analysis of Wittgenstein’s criticism of Moore that McGinn and other fans of inviolability interpretations favour is, we might now say, that it encodes this idea. According to the analysis, Wittgenstein is supposed to be assuming both that Moore’s utterances of ‘I know that such-and-such’ are nonsense and also that it is nevertheless possible to identify the meanings of the sentences to which Moore prefixes ‘I know’—at least well enough to inquire whether they can be made to ‘fit’ with ‘I know’. The upshot is that Wittgenstein appears to be describing the discovery of logical ‘misfits’ between the meanings of Moore’s sentences and the contexts in which he produces them or, in other words, that he appears to be claiming that Moore’s utterances are unintelligible on account of the particular (at least barely intelligible) things that they try, unsuccessfully, to say.
Consider the analysis of Wittgenstein’s criticism of Moore suggested by an interpretation of *On Certainty* which, in contrast to inviolability interpretations, takes into consideration Wittgenstein’s view of the limits of sense. On this alternative interpretation, Wittgenstein is claiming that there is no such thing as a clash between sentence-meaning and circumstances that results in the expression of a ‘senseless sense’. So we should expect that when Wittgenstein describes Moore’s utterance of ‘I know that such-and-such’ as nonsense, his point is not that there is something discordant or ill-fitting about (what we may be inclined to think of as) the sense Moore’s words do have; his point is, rather, that we reject Moore’s words because here they lack any clear meaning at all.28 Notice that this analysis is directly at odds with tenets of inviolability interpretations. Since Wittgenstein isn’t suggesting that any judgements are at play in Moore’s anti-sceptical practice, it follows that he isn’t suggesting that there are some judgements that are immune to criticism. But wouldn’t it be too hasty at this point to conclude that inviolability interpretations of *On Certainty* are bankrupt? What about Wittgenstein’s claim that some judgements ‘stand fast for us’? Doesn’t the fact that Wittgenstein associates such judgments with Moore’s anti-sceptical manoeuvres show that he thinks certain very basic judgements figure in those manoeuvres? And doesn’t this fact speak (in a manner that conflicts with the above observations about Wittgenstein’s remarks on the limits of sense) for an understanding of Wittgenstein as claiming that certain very basic judgements are inviolable? Despite whatever initial plausibility it possesses, the protest traced out in this series of questions cannot be sustained. Wittgenstein’s remarks about judgements ‘standing fast for us’ do not speak for an inviolability interpretation. In making them, Wittgenstein is not claiming that certain judgements lie beyond the reach of critical assessment. Rather, he is discussing ramifications of a view of judgement that is the conceptual counterpart of his view of the limits of sense.

If we help ourselves to an understanding of a ‘judgment’ as a move in a language-game, we can reformulate the later Wittgenstein’s view of the limits of sense in terms of the idea of the *priority of judgement*. Wittgenstein’s view rejects the assumption that we can somehow identify the logical character of expressions or features of speech-situations outside the context of complete judgements. After all, this assumption is consistent with the possibility that some utterances are nonsense because they employ expressions in contexts with which they are supposedly incompatible. And the mark of Wittgenstein’s view just is the thought that there is at best the appearance of a possibility here. So to endorse the later Wittgenstein’s view of the limits of sense is to
suggest that if we want to identify the logical character of expressions or features of speech situations we need to start with complete judgements and ask what logical contributions the pertinent expressions or features make to the judgements in question.

One of the later Wittgenstein’s strategies for defending the idea that judgements are logically privileged in this sense involves attacking pictures of language-acquisition on which we originally learn how to judge by appealing to the guidance of prior logical categories or rules. Wittgenstein repeatedly observes that learning to judge is ultimately a matter of nothing more than cottoning onto, or developing a sense for, what different judgements have in common. He attempts to show that as learners we are called upon to manifest an appreciation of which of the similarities among judgements presented to us are important. In one section of On Certainty, he puts it this way:

We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by learning rules: we are taught judgments and their connexion with other judgments. A totality of judgments is made plausible to us. (OC 140, emphasis in the original)

In another section, Wittgenstein sums up his view of judgement with these words: ‘We use judgments as principles of judgment’ (OC 124; see also 128–31).

This view of judgement forms the backdrop against which Wittgenstein talks about some judgements ‘standing fast’ for us. Since, according to this view, our ‘judgments themselves characterize ... what it is to judge’ (OC 149; I have modified the translation), it follows that in order to recognize an utterance as a judgement we need to incorporate it into the pattern of things we recognize as judgements. This leaves room for the possibility of situations in which, although it at first appears that a person is judging very differently, we fail to locate her utterance or inscription within a nexus of judgements – and, as a result, fail to recognize her as judging at all. The author of On Certainty repeatedly describes cases in which, although we may be inclined to respond to a person’s words by saying that she is wildly mistaken (e.g., when a man comes out with ‘I’m a woman’), it would – he thinks – be more correct to speak not of a mistake in judgement but of something like a mental disturbance. One of the suggestions he is making here is that in these cases there is no smooth or natural connection between the new utterance or inscription we encounter and judgements we already recognize. Another suggestion is that our experience of not being able to make sense of a new utterance or inscription reveals our reliance on
certain other judgements that, at least for the time being, don’t come into question for us. *This* is what Wittgenstein has in mind when he claims that ‘we discover the judgments that stand fast for us’.31

Although there is, as I mentioned in the last section, a sense in which Wittgenstein credits Moore (and, in particular, the Moore of ‘A Defence of Common Sense’) with the insight that some empirical judgements thus play a special role in our language, what deserves emphasis at this juncture is that there’s also a sense in which Wittgenstein charges Moore with betraying his own insight. In the part of his work in question here, Moore is attempting to refute scepticism about the external world by first listing sentences that (as Moore sees it) express commonsensical judgements and then prefixing ‘I know’ to them. Moore recognizes that his verbal performances are irregular, but he doesn’t think he needs to worry about their relationship to ordinary verbal performances.32 Wittgenstein, in contrast, thinks Moore needs to worry. Wittgenstein holds that there is no such thing as recognizing something as a judgement in a manner that doesn’t draw on our sense of how it fits into a larger pattern of judgements we already make. When Wittgenstein speaks, in a manner suggestive of indebtedness to Moore, of certain empirical judgements playing a special role in our language, it is precisely in reference to the idea of such a pattern. It follows that, from Wittgenstein’s perspective, Moore’s anti-sceptical procedures are unfaithful to the very insight on which they are founded. What Wittgenstein wishes to get us to see is that when Moore produces his utterances of ‘I know that such-and-such’ (utterances that are supposed to involve certain special empirical judgements), there is not enough continuity with what ‘stands fast for us’ for us to recognize the utterances as (even improper) assertions of knowledge – and hence not enough continuity for us to recognize them as involving any judgements at all.

At this point, it seems clear both that Wittgenstein’s rejoinder to Moore does not take the form of an argument to the effect that certain special judgements (say, those that ‘stand fast for us’) are inviolable, and also that Wittgenstein is therefore not an inviolability theorist. In addition, it also seems clear that Wittgenstein is not a relativist. Wittgenstein only appears to be a relativist if his remarks about how certain cultural gulfs need to be bridged by *persuasive* methods are construed as remarks about how certain such gulfs can only be bridged by *non-rational* means. And Wittgenstein’s view of judgement speaks directly against this construal of his remarks.

Wittgenstein’s view of judgement encodes a proposal for refashioning a deeply engrained philosophical conception of rationality that is
sometimes glossed in terms of the idea of a dispassionate or dehumanized standpoint. The pertinent conception is characterized by the epistemological assumption that a person’s ability to follow a rational line of thought cannot essentially depend on her possession of any particular subjective endowments (such as, e.g., attitudes, interests, etc.) and, further, that the ideal standpoint for rational reflection therefore abstracts from all such endowments. Wittgenstein attempts to show that the task of understanding and assessing judgements inevitably draws on our sense for, or appreciation of, the importance of the similarities that compose a network of judgements. He thus suggests that the exercise of rationality, far from calling on us to abstract from all our attitudes, essentially presupposes modes of appreciation that, as he sees it, we possess as judges. In making this suggestion, Wittgenstein asks us to exchange the deeply engrained philosophical conception of rationality for a conception that no longer requires a wholesale abstraction from elements of our subjective make-ups.

It’s possible to capture part of what’s striking about this philosophically irregular conception of rationality by observing that it leaves room for the possibility that persuasive modes of discourse – that is, modes of discourse that aim to elicit affective responses – may as such make a contribution to (rational) understanding. It follows from this observation that, by Wittgenstein’s lights, there’s no good reason to insist that persuasive modes of discourse are as such incapable of serving as a point of genuinely rational contact between people with very different cultural backgrounds. Further, given that Wittgenstein only appears to be a relativist if his remarks about persuasive methods are construed as remarks about non-rational methods, it follows that there’s no good reason to insist that he is a relativist.

We need a fresh start. A helpful place to turn at this juncture is the philosophically irregular conception of rationality – overlooked by fans of inviolability interpretations – that is embedded in Wittgenstein’s view of judgement. What distinguishes this conception from a philosophically more traditional conception of rationality is, as I mentioned, the fact that it dismisses the requirement of a blanket abstraction from elements of our subjective make-ups, and thus lays claim to a more permissive, or broader, epistemology. The conception might aptly be described as, in virtue of its broader epistemology, ‘wider’ than the philosophically more traditional – or ‘narrower’ – conception that Wittgenstein criticizes. This
4. Wittgenstein on ethics as a dimension of all our modes of thought and talk

You could attach prices to thoughts. Some cost a lot, some a little. And how does one pay for thoughts? The answer, I think, is: with courage. (CV 52)

A helpful way to approach these issues is to turn to the role the wider conception’s narrower counterpart plays in contemporary ethics. Consider, to begin with, how the narrower conception shapes the problem-space in which conversations about the nature of moral judgements take place. A pivotal theme in recent conversations in ethics is that efforts to straightforwardly incorporate our ordinary understanding of moral judgements as essentially a matter of sensitivity to the world raise serious philosophical questions. The questions that get mentioned in this context have to do with alleged obstacles to straightforwardly incorporating this feature of our ordinary understanding of moral judgements without thereby qualifying our entitlement to take at face-value a further feature of our ordinary understanding of such judgements – namely, the fact that they ordinarily strike us as having an immediate bearing on what we have reason to do. The alleged obstacles are functions of an influential metaphysics according to which there can be no such thing as features of the world that are both fully objective and also essentially pertinent to action. Moral philosophers generally assume that if a feature of the world stood in the sort of direct relation to our attitudes or interests that allowed it to be essentially pertinent to action it could not be properly objective.

This assumption is the metaphysical twin of the narrower conception of rationality. It is to the extent that we assume that objective features of the world must be constituted independently of attitudes and other elements of our subjective make-ups that it seems reasonable to think that arriving at an unobstructed view of objective reality must involve an abstraction from such subjective elements – and, by extension, that reflecting rationally about how things (objectively) are must involve the sort of abstraction from such subjective elements characteristic of the narrower conception. It is accordingly a testament to the influence of the...
metaphysical tradition to which the narrower conception belongs that nearly all ethical theories discuss moral judgements, in a manner respectful of the assumption, without appealing to any idea of objective and intrinsically practical properties. (Thus ethical theories that depict moral judgements as essentially a matter of sensitivity to features of the world – for example, classical cognitivist theories – tend to present themselves as earning their entitlement to do so by rejecting an understanding of such judgements as internally related to action and choice.34 And theories that depict judgements as intrinsically practical – for example, non-cognitivist theories of different kinds – tend to present themselves as earning their entitlement to do so by rejecting an understanding of moral judgements as essentially a matter of sensitivity to features of the world.35)

While the narrower conception of rationality is thus grounded in a metaphysical tradition that seems to raise questions about efforts to accommodate our ordinary understanding of moral judgements as essentially concerned with the layout of the world, the wider conception presupposes for its cogency a different metaphysic – one that makes room for features of the world that are both objective and intrinsically related to attitudes, and that accordingly removes the kinds of a priori obstacles that are generally taken to block attempts to combine this feature of our ordinary understanding of moral judgements with our ordinary understanding of them as immediately pertinent to action. It may, however, seem as though we have made little progress towards a satisfactory account of moral judgements as essentially concerned with how things are.

Suppose that we adopt an intuitively appealing view of moral concepts – one congenial to an understanding of their applications as directly pertinent to action – as intelligible only in terms of certain concerns or attitudes (say, the attitudes manifest in admiration or abhorrence for what falls under them). In this connection, we might observe that it is natural to understand the question of whether a moral concept applies to some object as one, not merely about whether it elicits the appropriate attitudes, but moreover about whether it merits them.36 And since the question of whether something merits the attitudes internal to a given moral concept is itself a moral question, we might also observe that it seems natural to understand our moral judgements as governed by standards that themselves reflect our substantive moral beliefs. What may now seem to speak against representing moral judgements as essentially a matter of sensitivity to how things are is the thought that efforts to assess them are guided by the very body of moral beliefs to which the judgements themselves belong and are thus characterized by a deep form of circularity.
Why should we take the presence of the relevant form of circularity as a mark of epistemic limitation? The presence of such circularity only seems to be a mark of epistemic limitation if we assume that it is possible to make sense of the idea of a wholly non-circular mode of discourse. For, to the extent that we make this assumption, we effectively see ourselves as licensed to the idea of a standpoint from which to determine that any circular mode of discourse must as such cut us off from how things really are. The trouble is that the idea of a wholly non-circular mode of discourse only appears intelligible within the context of the narrower conception of rationality. An ideally non-circular mode of discourse is narrowly rational insofar as, within it, applications of concepts are beholden to standards that have content apart from beliefs the pertinent mode of discourse embodies, and that can accordingly be applied independently of any sensitivities that we learn in acquiring those beliefs. This means that if, following in Wittgenstein’s footsteps, we reject the narrower conception we thereby deprive ourselves of a position from which to insist that the circular character of a practice of judgement-making – such as, for instance, our practice of moral judgement-making – by itself disqualifies it from having an essential concern with how things objectively are. The upshot is that, with the transition to the wider conception, we find ourselves entitled to an unproblematically objectivist view of moral judgement.

This basic line of reasoning is sometimes taken to speak for an understanding of Wittgenstein as bringing within our reach an acceptable moral realism. But there is an important sense in which the image of Wittgenstein as a moral realist is misleading. For the wider conception of rationality that informs Wittgenstein’s thought, in addition to positioning us to take at face-value our ordinary understanding of moral judgements as essentially concerned with how things are, also positions us to question the assumption – frequently associated with the idea of ‘moral realism’ – that such judgements have a monopoly on the moral business of language.

According to the view of moral judgement that I just sketched, competence with a set of moral concepts is essentially a matter both of the possession of certain affective propensities and also of having our eyes open to the world. In order to make sense of such competence, we need to be able to make sense of the idea of a process that is simultaneously one of refining affective propensities and of bringing features of the world into focus. Within the framework of the wider conception of rationality, it is possible to speak of a class of reflections that represent such a process. For in endorsing this conception we are endorsing a view of our linguistic
capacities as essentially involving the possession of a certain sensibility and, by the same token, we are also allowing that there may be connections of thought that are only available via some further development of sensibility. So here we need to be open to the possibility of reflections that essentially involve refinements of sensibility and that, while thus differing from (what might be thought of as) argumentative reflections in which inferences are drawn in a manner that does not call for any further development of sensibility, are nevertheless entirely sound.

One point that deserves emphasis here is that, to the extent that such non-argumentative reflections involve the cultivation of sensibility, and to the extent that moral understanding is essentially a matter of the possession of a certain sensibility, they are capable of making a direct contribution to moral understanding, and that in this respect they should be regarded as legitimate exercises of moral thought. Another point that deserves emphasis is that non-argumentative reflections of the kinds in question here are not restricted with regard to subject-matter. It may be easier to imagine how certain non-argumentative reflections about, say, poverty or friendship might contribute to moral understanding than it is to image how certain non-argumentative reflections about snow or the moon might do so. But there is no antecedent obstacle to allowing that reflections about the latter subjects – or, for that matter, about any subject whatsoever – might lead us to a new grasp of things that as such contributes to moral understanding. In this respect, the expansion of a more traditional inventory of forms of moral thinking that is prompted by the wider conception of rationality is at the same time an expansion of the concerns of ethics beyond a ‘region’ discourse distinguished by a particular subject-matter. Indeed, it would not be inappropriate to try to capture what is distinctive about this view of moral thinking by saying that it asks us to see that there is a sense in which ethics, far from being concerned with one particular region of discourse, is concerned with a dimension of all of it.

Part of what gives this gloss its interest, is the fact that, when we turn to Wittgenstein’s remarks on ‘ethical topics’, we discover that this – a view of ethics as concerned with a dimension of all of discourse – is one of their recurring themes. Wittgenstein develops this theme by claiming that all thought imposes a demand for an active or spontaneous contribution, and is therefore something one cannot help but do for oneself. (‘No one can think a thought for me in the way no one can don my hat for me’ CV 2.) He further elaborates it by claiming that thinking for oneself involves relying on and perhaps refining one’s sense of salience and significance, and therefore requires some sort of
self-mastery. (‘No one *can* speak the truth; if he has still not mastered himself’ CV 35.38) What thus emerges in Wittgenstein’s writing is the idea that all thought has an ethical dimension or, as Wittgenstein puts it at one point, that we cannot help but ‘pay for’ all our thoughts with a certain ethical effort.39

5. Conclusion: ethics and the difficulty of philosophy

Work on philosophy is ... actually more of a kind of work on oneself. (P 161)

Another recurring theme of remarks in which Wittgenstein touches on ‘ethical topics’ is that his own philosophical practice is properly characterized in ethical terms.40 It would be wrong to read remarks in which Wittgenstein sounds this theme as simply applying the view that ethics is a dimension of all thought to the case of philosophical thought. For Wittgenstein, the task of underlining the ethical dimension of language – that is, the task of underlining how we draw on and cultivate our modes of appreciation in every region of language – is central to philosophy. An organizing preoccupation of his later writings is criticizing approaches to language that presuppose that we can survey and assess judgements, or moves in a language-game, without relying on the sensibility we acquired in learning to judge. Wittgenstein consistently represents our tendency to make this presupposition as driving us into philosophical confusions about the workings of language. And, at the same time, he consistently discourages us from conceiving the project of working through such confusions as a merely intellectual enterprise directed towards convincing ourselves of the correctness of a new theoretical approach to language. He urges us to conceive it instead as an ethical enterprise directed towards bringing us face-to-face with our responsibility for what we say and think.41 This is what Wittgenstein has in mind when he writes, for example, that philosophy calls for ‘a kind of work on oneself’ and that it involves a peculiarly ethical type of ‘difficulty, having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect’ (CV 17; cf. also P 161).

*On Certainty*, like Wittgenstein’s other writings, exemplifies his conception of philosophy’s ethical difficulty. Wittgenstein’s guiding concern here is, as we saw, criticizing our tendency to imagine that we can turn on and investigate the credentials of our most basic beliefs from a standpoint independent of modes of response we acquired in learning language. Wittgenstein thinks this tendency is what underlies
our willingness to assume – in a manner he takes to be characteristic of both the sceptic and the sceptic’s dogmatic, Moorean interlocutor – that there is no need to reflect on whether the circumstances in which we want to utter our (allegedly investigative) words bear any affinity to circumstances in which we ordinarily utter those words. So it is with an eye towards getting us to repudiate the idea of a standpoint independent of our modes of response that he asks us to compare the utterances we produce in our philosophical endeavours with our ordinary modes of thought and speech. His goal is to get us to acknowledge that, to the extent that we fail to perceive any smooth and natural connection, we fail to attach any meaning to the words that we ourselves insistently produce. This is the respect in which the project of *On Certainty* is conceived as an ethical one. By redirecting attention back to sensibilities we possess as speakers, Wittgenstein hopes to get us to confront our responsibility for what we say and think.

One of my aims in this chapter has been to show that, as I can put it here in closing, inviolability interpretations fail to register *On Certainty*’s ethical aspirations. Although proponents of such interpretations rightly underscore Wittgenstein’s insistence on attention to circumstances in which we use expressions, they nevertheless wrongly assume that the relevant kind of attention involves an abstraction from all our modes of appreciation. The result is that they wind up preserving the idea of a standpoint on language from outside such modes of appreciation and, in doing so, obscuring Wittgenstein’s efforts to get us to face up to the need to rely on our own sensibilities. What gets lost is the sense in which the larger project of *On Certainty* – like that of Wittgenstein’s other writings – is a specifically ethical endeavour to bring us back to ourselves.42

**Notes**

1. I discuss a selection of remarks of these two different sorts in Sections 4 and 5.
2. G.H. von Wright gives roughly this advice to readers of *Culture and Value*, the collection of Wittgenstein’s writings that goes furthest towards assembling Wittgenstein’s remarks on ethical, aesthetic and political matters. In an editor’s preface, von Wright says that he is ‘convinced that [Culture and Value] can be properly understood and appreciated only against the background of Wittgenstein’s philosophy’ (CV, n.p.).
3. My primary topic in this chapter is the bearing of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy on ethics. I will say very little that bears directly on ethical implications of the *Tractatus* or of Wittgenstein’s pre-*Tractatus* writings. I am, however, sympathetic to the drift of the work of a number of philosophers (such as, e.g., Cora Diamond and James Conant) who have recently argued that there is significantly greater continuity between Wittgenstein’s early and later thought.
than is traditionally assumed, and a significant portion – but not all – of what I say below about Wittgenstein’s later work in relation to ethics could also be said about the *Tractatus*. In this connection, see Section 3.

4. For an early use of this label in connection with both Wittgenstein’s and J.L. Austin’s writings, see, for example, Searle (1969), 148.

5. One of the most influential readings in which this image is developed is presented in Baker and Hacker (1985). Baker and Hacker tell us, for example, that for Wittgenstein ‘[grammar’s] rules determine the limits of sense’ so that ‘by carefully scrutinizing [these rules] the philosopher may determine at what point he has drawn an overdraft on Reason, violated the rules for the use of an expression and so … traversed the bounds of sense’ (p. 55). Below, I consider a reading of *On Certainty* in particular that resembles Baker and Hacker’s reading of Wittgenstein’s later work in general in thus ascribing to him (what I am calling) a use-theory of meaning.

6. An interpretation qualifies as an ‘inviolability interpretation’ in my sense – without regard to whether it is developed by a critic or champion of Wittgenstein’s thought – if it (1) attributes to Wittgenstein some version of the sort of use-theory of meaning described in this section and (2) suggests that it follows from this theory that there is no such thing as rational criticism of language games. One of the earliest and most influential readings that counts as an inviolability interpretation in this sense is presented by Norman Malcolm. According to Malcolm, Wittgenstein holds both that ‘within a language-game there is justification and lack of justification, evidence and proof, mistakes and groundless opinions, good and bad reasoning, correct measurements and incorrect ones’ and, further, that ‘[o]ne cannot properly apply these terms to a language-game itself’ (1977b, 208; emphasis in the original).

7. The idea that Wittgenstein favours the form of relativism described in this paragraph is developed in, for example, H.O. Mounce and D.Z. Phillips’ allegedly Wittgensteinian analysis of moral discourse in *Moral Practices* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), esp. chapters 3, 4 and 9; and Kai Nielsen’s allegedly Wittgensteinian analysis of religious discourse in *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1982), chapters 3, 4 and 5. Although Mounce, Phillips and Nielsen have now all retreated to some degree from the idea that Wittgenstein favours relativistic modes of thought, this idea remains influential. Among the most comprehensive discussions of Wittgenstein’s alleged relativism are David Bloor, *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

8. The most prominent reader of Wittgenstein to defend this account of the ethical significance of his thought is Richard Rorty. I discuss relevant aspects of Rorty’s work in detail in ‘Wittgenstein’s Philosophy in Relation to Political Thought’ in Crary and Read (2000), 118–46.

9. That is, a theory on which the manner in which as expression is integrated into a set of linguistic practices fixes its meaning and, by the same token, determines what kinds of things can and cannot intelligibly be said with it.

10. Simon Blackburn first introduces this – widely used but, by my lights, unhelpful and misleading – jargon in connection with what he understands as ‘the belief of the later Wittgenstein that [metaphysical] problems require therapy rather than solution’ (1984, 146).
11. In this section I take Marie McGinn’s reading of *On Certainty* as a paradigmatic instance of what I am calling an inviolability interpretation.

12. For Grice’s introduction and discussion of this distinction, see *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. chapters 5, 6 and 18.

13. See Jim Conant’s helpful critique (1998) of readings of *On Certainty* that ascribe to Wittgenstein use-theories of meaning and then go on to offer analyses of Wittgenstein’s rejoinder to Moore that are grounded in those theories.

14. There is evidence of Wittgenstein’s admiration for Moore’s article not only in *On Certainty* but also in various biographical sources. In their preface to *On Certainty*, G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright write that ‘Wittgenstein had long been interested in [Moore’s “A Defence of Common Sense”] and had said to Moore that this was his best article’ (p. vi). Norman Malcolm disputes the suggestion that Wittgenstein’s interest in Moore’s article predates conversations Wittgenstein had with Malcolm in the summer of 1949 (1976, 172 n9), but nevertheless agrees that Wittgenstein’s interest was grounded in sincere admiration. (For Malcolm’s account of his conversations with Wittgenstein about Moore’s paper, see *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, second edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 70–5.)

15. The kinds of readings of *On Certainty* I am calling ‘inviolability interpretations’ are frequently described, in the secondary literature, as readings on which Wittgenstein endorses a ‘theory of framework judgments’ or a ‘theory of hinge propositions’.


17. McGinn at one point suggests that this putative problem is helpfully spelled out in terms of the Gricean category of speaker-meaning; cf. (1989), 106ff.

18. McGinn’s isn’t the only well-received interpretation of *On Certainty* that proceeds along these lines; cf. Malcolm (1976) and (1977b), and Avrum Stroll for whom Wittgenstein’s aim is to show that ‘some propositions – that the earth exists, that the earth is very old – are beyond any doubt; their certitude is absolute’ (1994, 138).

19. Here one has to bear in mind that Wittgenstein penned his remarks a couple of decades before anyone travelled to the moon.

20. It is accordingly not unusual for commentators who favour this basic interpretative approach to explicitly argue that when Wittgenstein speaks of persuasive methods ‘he must mean non-rational persuasion’ (Klagge, 1998, 270).

21. In this connection, see Conant’s discussion of McGinn in Conant (1998). Conant observes that McGinn ‘implicitly draws a distinction between a claim’s being meaningless and its being unintelligible’. He adds that, for McGinn: ‘Meaningfulness has to do with sentences, and intelligibility has to do with context-embedded speech-acts. It can be perfectly clear what the meaning of a sentence is; yet a context-embedded utterance of it can fail to be intelligible because it can fail to be intelligible as the act of a human agent participating in a humanly recognizable form of life’ (1998, 228).

22. The one occurrence of ‘unintelligible’ comes at the end of OC 10: ‘... one thinks that the words “I know that ...” are always in place where there is no
doubt, and hence even where the expression of doubt would be unintelligible [unverständlichen].’ In the numerous other remarks in On Certainty about whether certain doubts are transparent to understanding, Wittgenstein exchanges this talk of unintelligibility for talk of nonsense or the absence of sense. See, for example, §138 where the response to an interlocutor’s attempt to raise a doubt about whether the earth has existed for a hundred years is: ‘Nonsense [Unsinn].’. See also, for example, §372 where Wittgenstein writes: ‘“I doubt whether that is really my (or a) hand” makes no sense [hat keinen Sinn].’

23. See, for example, OC 348–51.
24. See, for example, TLP 3.0: ‘The logical picture of facts is the thought.’ (Here, as elsewhere, I make use of the Ogden translation.)
25. Immediately following this remark, Wittgenstein goes on to write: ‘It used to be said that God could create everything, except what was contrary to the laws of logic – But we couldn’t say of an “unlogical” world how it would look’ (3.031); I have revised Ogden’s translation slightly here. ‘To present in language anything which “contradicts logic” is as impossible as in geometry to present by its coordinates a figure which contradicts the laws of space; or to give the coordinates of a point which does not exist’ (3.032). See also the opening sections of ‘Notes Dictated to G.E. Moore in Norway’ in Notebooks 1914–1916.
26. See PI 499–500. For further passages that develop Wittgenstein’s view of the limits of sense in the distinctively later form in question here, see PG 130, and AWL 63–4.
27. Although I point out in this paragraph that the later Wittgenstein holds that circumstances of use contribute to the meaning of expressions, I do not mean to deny that the early Wittgenstein already held a version of this view. The Tractatus, as I read it, describes a form of inferentialism on which grasping the proposition expressed by a combination of signs is a matter of appreciating both the propositions from which it can be inferred and also the inferences that it in turn licenses. Here the exercise of situating a string of signs within an inferential context eliminates alternate logical possibilities left open by the signs themselves (see, e.g., TLP 3.323), and inferential context accordingly makes a direct contribution to content. It is in this respect that the Tractatus can be understood as anticipating Wittgenstein’s later emphasis on use. To be sure, there are significant differences between the ways in which Wittgenstein approaches these issues in his early and later writings. At the time of the Tractatus, he assumes that logical or inferential relations are exclusively truth-functional and, further, that truth-functional connectives determine the ‘logical space’ in which inferences get made in a quasi-mechanical manner. (See, e.g., the discussion of what follows from the introduction of a logical connective at TLP 5.44–5.4541.) In later writings, Wittgenstein abandons this exclusive focus on truth-functionality and criticizes the picture of logical consistency or regularity he once championed in connection with it. Now he insists that our ability to understand a judgement depends on our possession of an appreciation of the importance of similarities and differences among other judgements that make up the language game to which the new judgement belongs.
28. See the epigraph to this section.
29. This would, for example, be a way of describing a central ambition of the opening seventy or so sections of the Philosophical Investigations. For a classic
discussion of relevant aspects of Wittgenstein’s view of language-learning, see Cavell (1979), 168–90.

30. The parenthetical example is from OC 79. See also, for example, OC 71–4, 80–1, 138, 155, 420, 474, 494, 624, 628, 630, 645, 659, 674.

31. Notice that this account of Wittgenstein’s claim differs from the accounts given by fans of inviolability interpretations in its incorporation of the view of judgement I have been ascribing to Wittgenstein (i.e., the view that our ability to recognize judgements essentially presupposes our appreciation of the importance of similarities constitutive of a network of judgements). Inviolability interpretations at least tacitly assume that it is possible to recognize utterances (such as, e.g., Moore’s utterances of ‘I know that such-and-such’) as concerned with particular (‘framework’) judgements even if we have not yet appreciated them as intelligible moves in a language-game. In making this assumption, they effectively represent us – in a manner unfaithful to Wittgenstein’s view of judgement – as capable of surveying judgements from outside the sensibility we possess as judges.

32. Moore is happy to acknowledge that, as he once put it in a letter to Norman Malcolm, he is using ‘I know’ ‘under circumstances under which [this expression] would not ordinarily be used’. Moore defends his practice by insisting that although he is not using his words ‘under any ordinary circumstances’, he is nevertheless using them ‘in the ordinary sense’. (These passages from Moore’s correspondence are cited in Malcolm (1976), 173–4.)

33. For a classic formulation of this assumption, see J.L. Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (London: Penguin, 1977), 38–42.

34. Perhaps the best-known realist theories that is externalist in this respect (i.e., in that it depicts moral judgements as only externally tied to action) is described by Philippa Foot in Virtues and Vices (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

35. Notice that this second group of theories includes, in addition to a range of familiar emotivisms, prescriptivisms, error-theories and expressivisms, also the less familiar form of ethical non-cognitivism implicit in the globally non-cognitivist outlook that fans of inviolability interpretations ascribe to Wittgenstein (see Section 1).


38. See also CV 33 and 45 and Rush Rhees’ comments on relevant matters in Rhees (1984), esp., p. 174.

39. See also CV 35 and 38.

40. Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy as an intrinsically ethical endeavour gets expressed, not only in various (published and unpublished) remarks, but also in various biographical anecdotes and letters. Rush Rhees reports
that Wittgenstein used to try to impress on students what he saw as the ethical demands of philosophizing by urging him to go ‘the bloody hard way in philosophy’ (1969, 169). (I am indebted to James Conant for drawing my attention to this comment of Rhees.’) See also Wittgenstein’s comments, in letters to Malcolm, about the ethical challenge of teaching philosophy (Malcolm 1984, 33–4).

41. It is in connection with this sort of account of what Wittgenstein regards as the ethical point of philosophizing that we can begin to understand his notoriously perplexing claims about how his ambition in philosophy is not to ‘advance theses’ (e.g., PI 128).

42. I am indebted to Nancy Bauer, Cora Diamond and Richard Moran for discussing an early draft of this paper and making a number of useful suggestions. I am also indebted to Bill Brenner, Arata Hamawaki, Nathaniel Hupert, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, Rupert Read and Ed Witherspoon for many helpful comments. I presented versions of the paper at Tufts University and at the Wittgenstein Workshop at the University of Chicago. I am grateful for the feedback I received on these occasions.
The paragraph numbered ‘501’ in the notes that have come down to us under the title of *On Certainty* raises a puzzle. At least, I think that most readers of Wittgenstein should find it very puzzling. It runs as follows:

Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it.

This chapter is about the puzzle I see this remark of Wittgenstein’s as raising.

Part of the puzzle, as will be quite obvious to aficionados of the later Wittgenstein, might be put roughly thus: isn’t it well known that, according to the later Wittgenstein, philosophy (at least, when done aright) consists of *nothing but* description(s)? (see especially PI 124–6). But that seems to be pretty much *directly contradicted* by the question and the answer that *On Certainty* 501 consists in. That remark, as we have just seen, seems to say that we can perhaps see (the logic of) our language, but cannot describe it. What is going on here?

It may be that some handle on this puzzle will be available to us, if we look at the similarities as well as the differences between the way in which ‘description’ supposedly features in Wittgenstein’s philosophy or philosophies, prior to the last period of his life (when he wrote *On Certainty*), according to leading extant interpretations of him. Especially as, increasingly, many of those interested in Wittgenstein’s philosophy are to be heard urging that the continuities between ‘early’ and ‘later’ Wittgenstein have been underestimated. A popular way of understanding those continuities, as a means of comparing the ‘theories’ of language
that Wittgenstein was allegedly committed to in the two main different phases in his career, runs roughly thus (see Table 14.1).

One could perhaps add on a third column, entitled ‘Third’ or ‘Last’, to refer to the further developments in Wittgenstein’s thinking after about 1945. The ‘Third’ (or ‘Last’, or ‘Latest’ or ‘Final’) Wittgenstein could be distinguished from the ‘Later’ (sometimes called ‘Second’) Wittgenstein through his perhaps greater interest in context, in legitimate occasions for utterance, and otherwise. According roughly to the schema of Table 14.1, this ‘Final’ Wittgenstein would thereby be telling us (in a fuller fashion than ‘the language-game theory’ manages to do) just how our linguistic practices are, by means of what might be called a ‘context theory’ or ‘framework theory’ of our life with language. We shall shortly return to this (problematic but) suggestive thought.

The two accounts of the nature of language (in Table 14.1) both claim to tell us how language really is. It is fair to say that, even if many protagonists of Wittgenstein’s later work would be reluctant to use the term ‘theory’ of their own view, the structure of their view is such that it aims – or sees Wittgenstein as aiming – to represent our practices (and our language) to us perspicuously and systematically, albeit in detail and in their variety and not through a single lens. They are offering us a purportedly correct and adequate – ‘bird’s-eye’ – account (adequate in ways that the *Tractatus*’s account was not) of our use of language, of our language-games.

We should ask what the point is of achieving such a ‘bird’s-eye’ account; what is the *point* of the descriptions assembled by the later Wittgenstein, according to this reading of him? Sometimes, it seems to be simply to tell us the truth about (our) language, to say how it is with our language. Austin warned against the thought that *simply* ‘telling the truth’ was ever likely to be a good enough motivation for doing something. If this is why Wittgenstein described things, then he surely inherited rather too much from early Wittgenstein, according to this reading of him. The thought that what Wittgenstein is about is simply understanding how our language-games are – describing them for description’s sake – is a residue of (a defunct) metaphysical ambition.

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**Table 14.1** Wittgenstein’s supposed theories of language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Early’</th>
<th>‘Later’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One all-encompassing description/explanation of language: <em>The picture theory of language</em></td>
<td>Many fine-grained descriptions of language-games: <em>Use-theory (or language-game theory)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If we are to reckon with the most plausible version of the picture offered in (the second column of) Table 14.1, then we ought to say something like this: that the point of Wittgenstein’s descriptions is to have a method of / criterion for separating sense from nonsense. It is that thought that I will now proceed to question.

Now, there is clearly something right about such a schema of Wittgenstein’s development as is set out in Table 14.1. One only has to look at, say, PI 23, to see this. However, this schematic view of Wittgenstein suggests that the continuity in his philosophy lies in him having something which seems awfully like a theory, and yet in his later work – and in fact in the Tractatus, too! – Wittgenstein urges his readers not to take him as theorizing (e.g., PI 116–32; TLP 4.112). True, this theorizing need not take the form of any Metaphysical Realism. Indeed, both accounts, in sticking to talk of language, are naturally read as licensing ‘Anti-Realism’. This is obvious in the case of the later Wittgenstein (who has often been read as some kind of Idealist or Relativist); but to see that it can apply also to early Wittgenstein, one need only recall that the first influential interpretation of Wittgenstein saw him laying out all the essential groundwork for logical positivism. Positivistic Anti-Realism, such as the ferocious opposition of the Vienna Circle to all metaphysics, is founded on the Tractatus.

Indeed, one might risk characterizing the class of positions enabled by Wittgenstein as understood in Table 14.1, above, as ‘Carnapian’, remembering that Carnap passed through many incarnations in his philosophical development, and through a number of positions at least superficially resembling the ‘positions’ occupied by Wittgenstein at different times in his career, and that what all of these positions had in common was a commitment to giving a (positivistic or post-positivistic) Anti-Realist account of language. Carnap was much more than a logical positivist; his development led him to more sophisticated views, views which in fact quite a number of contemporary philosophers are still arguably catching up with. But was Wittgenstein, even in his later work, really any more sympathetic to Anti-Realism than to (Metaphysical) Realism? Wasn’t his attitude rather, a plague on all your ‘isms’?! There is, in any case, something else very troubling about the ‘Carnapian’ view of the continuities in Wittgenstein’s thinking. Table 14.1 is simply inadequate to the text of the Tractatus, at least. Notoriously, Wittgenstein’s masterly early work ends by declaring itself a load of nonsense, and the reader must throw it away. Notoriously, Carnap and friends failed to read (or any rate to do any justice to) the closing segments (more generally, the ‘frame’) of the book. Notoriously, Wittgenstein despaired of their (or
perhaps anyone) understanding it. What Wittgenstein gave with one hand, he apparently took away with the other: the Picture Theory might be true, but it could not be said. Language, strictly speaking, was indescribable. The harmony between language and reality was ineffable, and could at best be ‘shown’. The latter notion became the term of choice for those who, as the positivist interpretation of the *Tractatus* collapsed in the light of its obvious gaps, sought to explain what Wittgenstein was actually saying in his early work. Wittgenstein was taken to be gesturing at truths not only about logic and language, but about the world as a whole, truths which could not ‘strictly’ be spoken. James Conant has characterized this (class of) interpretations of the *Tractatus* as ‘ineffabilist’. Ineffabilism naturally tends towards (Metaphysical) Realism (because if one can’t say anything about the world in philosophy, ‘surely’ one can still gesture at it / at ‘deep’ truths about it). What the ‘ineffabilist’ and ‘positivist’ doctrines have in common is a ‘“substantial” conception of nonsense’, and a concomitant opposition to taking contextualism (initially, sentential contextualism) seriously.

Still, there is a fair bit to be said for thinking that ineffabilism is onto something that positivism fails to see. Indeed, James Conant convincingly argues that ineffabilism genuinely is a stage further (than positivism) along the philosophical dialectic explored in the *Tractatus*, most importantly perhaps, because ineffabilist readings have something coherent to say about the ‘frame’ of the *Tractatus*. Or rather, they at least possess the superficial appearance of having something coherent to say about the frame. I say ‘superficial’, because actually ‘ineffabilism’ depends upon a quite un-Wittgensteinian and unhelpful extension of the ‘say versus show’ distinction – ineffabilists take nonsense to be able to show things that cannot be said, but this is no part of Wittgenstein’s account of showing in the body of the *Tractatus*. Superficial also in that ineffabilism fails to understand the therapeutic point of Wittgenstein’s work: that one is supposed to succumb to philosophical temptations that result in a pull towards for example positivism, and (ultimately) ineffabilism, and then overcome the very sentences which thus urged one to succumb, and truly to throw them away.

Still, ineffabilism is a step further along the philosophical dialectic (as in the *Tractatus*), at least. So now an interesting question arises: Is there then some reason for an ineffabilistic reading of later Wittgenstein? An ineffabilistic reading of later Wittgenstein would urge one to look for the say versus show distinction as still present and pregnant in Wittgenstein’s later writings; it would ask questions like, ‘How could one possibly *say*, strictly speaking, what the human form(s) of life is (are)?
Isn’t this something that can only be at best gestured at, or perhaps thought, and not said?’ For to say it, would seem to require seeing our form(s) of life from outside, ‘from sideways on’. Ineffabilism about Wittgenstein’s later work would accent those of Wittgenstein’s concepts which appear to take us up to or beyond the limits of language – concepts such as ‘agreement’, and ‘form(s) of life’.

Ineffabilist readings of later Wittgenstein are not as common as ‘Carnapian’ readings of him, but they crop up reasonably regularly. A distinguished recent example is John Koethe’s book, The Continuity of Wittgenstein’s Thought. The ‘continuity’ of the title, the reader will by now perhaps be unsurprised to hear, is not that set out in Table 14.1. It is rather of the fashion indicated below (see Table 14.2).

This table, then, is an ineffabilist counterpart to Table 14.1. Where Table 14.1 pictures the continuities within Wittgenstein’s philosophy to lie most especially within his espousal of an account – even, a theory – of language of a broadly Carnapian nature, and thus tending towards Anti-Realism, here that theory is taken to be unstatable, and a kind of ‘pictorial’ Realism – in which the structure of the world, or the foundations of our Lebensformen, should be seen but not heard – expresses Wittgenstein’s vision, instead.

Of course, the most common view of Wittgenstein’s development remains one according to which he goes from an Ineffabilistic Realism (in the Tractatus) to some form of Anti-Realism (in his later work). This view is that which we find in, for example, Norman Malcolm and Peter Hacker. But this should prompt an uncomfortable worry: If Wittgenstein were truly an ineffabilist in his early work, and a ‘Carnapian’ in his later work, wouldn’t this mean that his later work is actually less developed, less satisfactory, than his earlier work?

As already suggested, part of the appeal of ineffabilism, as applied to Wittgenstein’s later work, is that it can appear to be less theoreticistic – less like the stating of controversial theses – than Carnapianism. Ineffabilism appears to offer an opportunity of reading Wittgenstein’s ‘reminders’, and his ‘grammatical remarks’, and the moments in his work when

| Table 14.2 Wittgenstein’s supposed ineffabilist visions of language |
| --- | --- |
| ‘Early’ | ‘Later’ |
| The crystalline structure of language – the relation of language to world – is shown, not said. | The way language-games work – the nature of our forms of life – are shown, not said. |
something almost Kantian appears to be happening, thus: as hints at the
kind of thing which we get in much more detail in certain moments in
Heidegger. We can read ‘forms of life’ as part of a gnomic gesture toward
the aspects of human life which, strictly speaking, cannot be said, as
part of a background which we can foreground only by ‘violating the
limits of language’. So: the ineffabilistic version of ‘form of life’ says that
what the positivists are trying to capture is something that cannot be
captured; that ‘the stream of life’ is something, but something that
always evades philosophical theorizing. Ineffabilism’s trouble is in how
it can say so much – or indeed anything – about this ‘something’ about
which nothing further, so it says, can be said. In other words, how can
it say quite a lot about what it says is unsayable? It is one thing, perhaps,
to be loquacious about silence; but about the (content of the) unsayable?

Thus while the way that (later) Wittgenstein is usually taken
on the ques-
tion of ‘use’ might be said to be Carnapian in nature – to be an Anti-
Realist would mean the reduction of meaning to use, where use is
understood as place in a substantial and static grammar (even if it be
emphasized, as Pragmatist readers of Wittgenstein for example do, that
this grammar itself may change, such that different meanings become
possible at different times) – this rarer ‘Ineffabilistic’ alternative to
such a conception holds that there is a Truth to what use is, to how our
language-games in general and in their specifics are, but a Truth that we
can only gesture at, or perhaps think but not say!

Is there any way out of this labyrinth? A possible partial way out, one
step forward at least in the ‘dialectic’, is by now obvious: what if we actu-
ally tried reading later Wittgenstein, right to the end, as an ‘ineffabilist’?
In terms of On Certainty, this would among other things mean the
following: taking ‘the framework’, or our ‘Weltbild’, not, as most com-
mentators do, as statable, as (re-)presentable, but rather as unstatable, as
ineffable. One would take a remark like OC 455: ‘Every language-game
is based on words “and objects” being recognized again’, and – noting
that it is not clear that it could mean anything to attempt to portray or
imagine the opposite – one would conclude that this remark is actually
indexing or gesturing at something profound and unsayable.

A little further on in On Certainty, there is a remark which potently
seems to advertise that there is ineffabilism in later (last) Wittgenstein.
I am thinking of OC 501: ‘Am I not getting closer and closer to saying
that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice
of language, then you will see it.’ Here, Wittgenstein is apparently led
to ask himself a question which seems to echo what the ineffabilists say
of TLP: that its doctrine is that logic cannot be described. And that its
apparent doctrine is all in truth unstatable. At the end of all Wittgenstein’s long and involved journeying, it seemingly comes to this. Or, does this remark even suggest that Wittgenstein realizes that this – this saying that it is all unsayable – is what he had been saying all along? That all the seemingly precise and concrete descriptions of language-games and so on really come to is a realization that language cannot be said, cannot be described?

OC 501 is crystal-clearly, definitely, an indication of apparent continuity between what is last and what was more or less first in Wittgenstein’s philosophizing. And in this wonderful moment, of our witnessing Wittgenstein wondering and worrying, almost at the end, as to whether he has actually made any progress in his writing from where he apparently started, we have seemingly a great clue to the possibility and potential utility of an ineffabilist reading of Wittgenstein, or at least of key strands in his last writings. Of course, we will not have, on this account, the kind of simple clear view intimated in the first column of Table 14.2, above. Rather, the logic of our language etc. will presumably be seen rather in its specifics, in the kinds of concrete cases exemplified by Wittgenstein’s motley of discussions in later-philosophy texts, like OC. But the important point will be that the continuity in Wittgenstein’s thought will remain his emphasis on the unsayability of the important things that, in doing philosophy, we can get to see.

Now, what do mainstream commentators on *On Certainty* make of 501? I am thinking of those many who (I have suggested) are ‘Carnapian’ readers of the later (or of the last) Wittgenstein, or who Alice Crary (in Chapter 13 in this volume) calls ‘inviolability’ interpreters of his work, on the grounds that they think it renders our practices immune to rational criticism describable, but nevertheless ‘inviolable’ except at the risk of the purveying of nonsense (of ‘violations of logical (or logicopragmatical) syntax’). These readers tend to think that we can cite – or state – ‘framework propositions’ to defuse the importunate questions of a sceptic, for example by saying something like: ‘You cannot doubt that you have a body (though not because you know it).’ Relativistic readers of OC for example, and readers of it who, ‘after Carnap’, similarly take OC’s teaching to concern what you are (not) allowed to say when, and what violates the bounds of sense through attempting to doubt a ‘hinge proposition’ or such-like: what do they make of this moment in Wittgenstein’s text where he appears to cast doubt on the possibility of so much as actually stating meaningfully what the hinge-propositions are?

The answer is: virtually nothing at all. Remarks like 501 just don’t get a serious gloss, in the writings on *On Certainty* of McGinn, Hacker,
Malcolm, Morawetz, and others. In 501, Wittgenstein apparently intimates that ineffabilism might be preferable to Carnapianism and the like, that perhaps the structure of our language and our commitments, which he appeared to be laying out in OC, is ‘in fact’ ineffable, and can at most be seen, be ‘shown’. But this intimation is in most cases simply ignored, by those who should find it most troubling (or potentially illuminating).

Carnapian readers of OC make the same mistake that the positivist readers of TLP made: they fail to notice the key moments in the text when Wittgenstein pulls the rug from under those who would hope (after the fashion indicated in Table 14.1, above) to be able to say what logic, or language, is all about. With the Tractatus, Hacker and McGinn have higher standards; they insist on the plain textual inadequacy of positivist renditions of that text. Somehow, their standards seem to fall when it comes to Wittgenstein’s later writings. Now, the loose and rough structure of these last jottings of Wittgenstein that we know as On Certainty of course provides McGinn et al. with a partial excuse; it is easier to downgrade or avoid OC 501 than it is to avoid (say) TLP 6.54. I now turn, then, to the more critical philosophical issue of what there is to be said for ineffabilism, in – and around – OC 501.

Can logic not be ‘said’? Can it be ‘shown’? Can we, for Wittgenstein, describe language? Do ‘grammatical remarks’, and lists of ‘framework propositions’ – judgements that ‘constitute the framework’ ‘conditions’ of our practice – for instance, do so? I think the correct answer is: yes and no. We would do well, for starters, to remember PI 291: ‘What we call “descriptions” are instruments for particular purposes.’ Descriptions are never just descriptions, we might say. Those who pursue a ‘Wittgensteinian’ agenda as if that agenda were simply one of pure description are running a serious risk.

We can of course assemble descriptions of what people say, of when they say it, even of why and how they say it. In their differing ways, this is part of the accomplishment of the ‘reminding’ enterprises of Wittgenstein, Austin and Garfinkel. But there is a kind of super-description that is a fantasy. And that is ‘beyond’ us. The fantasy of ‘super-description’ is, I think, what many philosophers, including some ‘Wittgensteinians’, are often after.

Now, it might be objected that my model of ‘theorizing’ (as opposed to ‘reminding’) tendentiously identifies theorizing with the production of more-or-less metaphysical super-descriptions. Must the attempt to be systematic and philosophically relevant lead to metaphysics in any troubling sense of that word? Possibly not. But I have seen no positive
evidence of this. The end products of all such attempts (such as by Peter Strawson or, more recently, Meredith Williams), and of most accounts that claim even to respect and follow Wittgenstein’s therapeutic conception of philosophy, involve ‘super-description’, involve (variegated) attempts to set out consequential grammatical limitations to language-use or such-like. Gordon Baker’s recent internal criticisms of the Baker–Hacker allegedly-Wittgensteinian programme are particularly pertinent – in fact, devastating – here.¹⁶

The super-description which I think tends to be fantasized by Carnapian readers of Wittgenstein sets out exactly, and almost as if from the outside, how the language works. It is imagined as utterly cool and pure, and envisages Wittgenstein’s ‘ideal’ of clarity as actually attainable, or already attained. It doesn’t much matter whether one imagines such a super-description as occurring all at once (as in TLP) or gradually, in bits (as in Wittgenstein’s later/last work). The fundamental conception remains the same, and is the same misconception of what Wittgenstein was about, throughout. Indeed, the ‘Carnapian’ vision of Wittgenstein’s post-\textit{Tractatus} work is more dangerous, because it can give the illusion of having made real philosophical progress over the \textit{Tractatus}, and to some extent at least of having abandoned the allegedly ‘overly high ambitions’ of that work.

The Anti-Realist flavour of standard readings of \textit{On Certainty} involves, if I am right, an attempt to represent entirely clearly to us how our language really is; or alternatively (if it tends in an Idealist or Relativist direction), an attempt to get us to understand exactly how we are stuck in language / in our practices. And here one should note a deep danger in some of the metaphors which Wittgenstein occasionally employs (e.g., ‘übersichtliche Darstellung’), which standard readings of later Wittgenstein over-emphasize and misrepresent. The danger of terms such as ‘perspicuous representation [of grammatical rules]’,¹⁷ ‘surview of the grammar’, and the like, is of a fantasy of Realism creeping into (and thus muddling or obscuring) one’s Carnapianism: the danger is that one will think that, armed with one’s perspicuous representations of language-games and so on, one will eventually (or even immediately, if one is especially immodest) be able to map the totality of linguistic practice, or to set ‘the grammar’ in stone, if only for a brief period. There is no such thing as a bird’s eye-view¹⁸ of our linguistic practices, not even bit by bit.

Wittgenstein actually offers us something very different from this. One might try the following: his ‘reminders’ ought not to be construed as reminding us of anything in the nature of a philosophical truth or insight. In particular, we are not reminded of facts about how our
language is structured (nor even of ineffable truths). We are reminded only, in a very down-to-earth fashion, of particular things like a certain use or uses of words which it may help us to remember, at a particular time, in the grip of a particular kind of delusion. How will this help? By returning us to the actual (or potential) practice of our language. That is all. Wittgenstein’s remarks are, I want to say, through and through occasioned and transitional. Any descriptions of practices offered in those remarks are then subject to the over-arching therapeutic aim, the aim of effecting an intellectual–practical transition. They have no free-standing validity. We might say: descriptions in Wittgenstein’s sense, as they ‘work’ in his work, do not stand, at all.

But one does not have to accept this, to see the appeal and point of something like the ineffabilist reaction against standard (Carnapian) readings of for example On Certainty. Take OC 494:

‘I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgment.’

But what sort of proposition is that? (It is reminiscent of what Frege said about the law of identity.) It is certainly no empirical proposition. It does not belong to psychology. It has rather the character of a rule. (OC 494)

The opening sentence (in quotations marks), is just the kind of remark that is standardly taken to be the teaching of On Certainty. One is supposed to learn the occasions on which one can refuse to answer the sceptic, by citing a ‘framework-proposition’, or by refusing to doubt at bedrock. One is supposed to know what it is that the sceptic is trying to say, but also to know that that cannot sensically be said, here and now, and/or can be sensically rebutted or refused or ‘dissolved’.

But if we reflect on ‘I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgment’, we will soon notice that there is no genuine alternative to it. It is not, that is, as though there is any such thing – anything that we can make any sense of – as ‘giving up all judgment’. There is no thing here which one cannot do. If one attempts to describe what it would be to doubt some very ‘basic’ proposition, one simply comes up short; one is flummoxed. This is what an ineffabilist reader would, more or less rightly, say here: that to say that ‘I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgment’ is to say something very strange. It is, in an important sense, not to say anything at all. Because there is nothing it would be to say the opposite.

And this, of course, is just what Wittgenstein himself remarks. The standard interpretation would have us expect him not to worry much about the stating that such-and-such a ‘basic’ proposition is a ‘hinge’, or
such like. (Indeed, the making of such statements is, on standard readings, the central point of On Certainty.) But he does worry. He says that the sentence ‘I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgement’ reminds him of what Frege said about the law of identity. What does Frege say about the law of identity? He says that it is a fundamental principle, ‘a law of being true’.19 And what does Wittgenstein think about the ‘law of identity’? He thinks it utterly absurd: he thinks there is no more useless ‘proposition’ known to humankind.20 An ineffabilist might prefer to put it this way: the law of identity cannot be said.21 So that this sentence, which on the standard reading of OC is the very kind of thing Wittgenstein is trying to get us to understand, and say on the correct occasion, is, for Wittgenstein himself, awfully close to being a paradigm of unstatability.

A Carnapian reader of 494 might respond by invoking the last sentence of the paragraph. Doesn’t Wittgenstein admit here that ‘I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgment’ is itself a kind of kosher proposition; namely, a rule? Well, he says roughly that it has the character of a rule. And rules, for Wittgenstein, are not really rules unless they are followed, or (better?) acted upon.22 Often, the enunciation alone of a rule is pointless or counter-productive. It is better to stay at a more concrete level of action. This is roughly what Wittgenstein recommends in 495: ‘One might simply say “O, rubbish!” to someone who wanted to make objections to the propositions that are beyond doubt. That is, not reply to him but admonish him.’ We see Wittgenstein here recommending not that one attempt to instruct an imagined sceptic with what one is allowed to say when, but simply to admonish him. This brings out something that the ineffabilist reader will be keen on: a profound sense in which logic can not be explicitly justified. (It can, I suggest, only be ‘returned’ to, and lived.)

The trouble with standard readings of OC can now, perhaps, be put this way: they do not hold fast to a recognition of how very different ‘speaking the framework’ is from (what we might call) ordinary speech. ‘Framework propositions’ are in an important respect not propositions at all. Carnapian, (post-)positivist readings of OC are always running the risk of backsliding into a kind of ersatz foundationalism, whenever they forget that ‘Weltbild propositions’ are least misleadingly regarded as barely propositions at all, as something perhaps more like rules, which are often best simply followed; and as statable only at a certain grave risk of vacuity or of philosophical delusion. Wittgenstein returns to the same concern, a couple of paragraphs later, at 498, whose translation I have
The queer thing is that even though I find it quite correct for someone to say ‘Nonsense!’ and so brush aside the attempt to confuse him with doubts at bedrock, – nevertheless, I hold it to be incorrect if he seeks to defend himself (using, e.g., the words ‘I know’).

And would it be so very different if he sought to defend himself by saying: ‘This proposition is a hinge, and so it is invulnerable to doubt’, or something similar? The standard reading of *On Certainty* fails adequately to distinguish Wittgenstein from Moore. The *structure* of the standard reading is the same as Moore’s; the only real difference is that the standard reading refrains religiously from employing the word ‘know’, here.

Wittgenstein does not recommend defending oneself against scepticism, even through the description of a form of life or of rules for when it is meaningful or otherwise to say so and so. Rather than seeking to describe even the local logic, by, for example, giving/stating a ‘framework(-proposition)’, or (Moore’s particular version) saying that one knows that it is so, one can (and probably should) simply say, ‘Nonsense!’ Now consider 499–500:

I might also put it like this: the ‘law of induction’ can no more be *grounded* than certain particular propositions concerning the material of experience. (OC 499)

But it would also strike me as nonsense to say ‘I know that the law of induction is true’. (OC 500)

Would it be any better to say: ‘The law of induction stands fast for me’? It is hard to see why that would be any better at all, why it would be relevantly different at all.

An ineffabilist might say that the whole point of OC is to make the kind of certainty in question here *non-epistemic*, a non-ratiocinated standing fast, rather than a knowing. Good, but as long as the ineffabilist asserts something like that bluntly and *with no apparent awareness of the paradoxicality and unsatisfactoriness of stating it*, as a thesis, as something we can seem to grasp and know, then they have failed to comprehend Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy. They have failed to stick to ‘therapy’, and are slipping irresolutely into limning the knowable and the statable – into nonsense.

A subtler ineffabilist, perhaps rightly, may then urge us to say that Wittgenstein is pressing, in these remarks, against the very attempt to
describe logic that is implicit in pretty much any mention of ‘the law of induction’. Again, the ineffabilist willing to make this move seems to be onto something simply missing in the standard (Carnapian) reading of On Certainty. And so, to 501:

Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it. (OC 501)

First off, we should note that Wittgenstein does not simply state a thesis. He does not say, blankly, ‘Logic cannot be described’. He asks a question, a question which can now be seen to emerge naturally from the foregoing paragraphs in On Certainty.

If there is a significance in the switch from the word ‘logic’ to the phrase ‘the practice of language’, it is perhaps that there is less danger of reifying the latter than the former. If you look at the practice of language, you will see (what) logic (‘really’ is, what it can be relatively unmisleadingly characterized as being). To see logic is nothing more than to see the practice of language as it actually is. Or in an even more deflationary spirit, given the virtual equivalence frequently in Wittgenstein’s later thought between logic and (the perspicuous presentation of) the practice of language, one might almost recast Wittgenstein’s thought as follows: if you look aright at the practice of language, you will see it (the practice of language!). (Wittgenstein’s writing is not meant to contain controversial theses. So we should not be too surprised if sometimes it resolves aspectually into tautology.) There is no logic other than (or ‘before’) the logic of our language, which is utterly immanent in (the practice of) language, not anything other than it. All that logic is, is language under a certain – peculiar, transitional – description. The fundamental phenomenon hereabouts is an enacted grasp of language-in-action that is common to us all, not some alleged formal aspect of our language (e.g., its ‘framework’) that it is the philosopher’s privilege to consider and enunciate (or gesture at).

So there is nothing mysterious here? If we see it all in order as it is, then why can’t it be described? Why does 501 still seem to end as it begins, in complicity with ineffabilism? Must we concede to the ineffabilist that the practice of language can only be seen, not heard, written or read? Well, it all depends, as I have explained above, what one wants to mean by ‘describe’. Wittgenstein famously rejects explanation of language in favour of description (in PI 124). Such that we could say that Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is resolutely and thoroughgoingly descriptive. But we could with equal justice say that the later Wittgenstein
resolutely and thoroughly follows through on the indescribability of language proclaimed in the *Tractatus*.

Don’t take this as a contradiction within Wittgenstein’s theory and practice. Don’t take it even as a clash between ‘positivistic’ and ‘ineffabilistic’ strains in his philosophy. For, as Baker in particular (over the last decade and a half) has beautifully shown, Wittgenstein’s remarks are *purpose-relative*, and therapeutic. It is a matter of trying to reorient oneself in relation to what one always already understands in practice, just by virtue of being a language-user, a human being. For sure, what we do is (can be described as) to give descriptions – provided one understands that there is a sense in which descriptions are never just descriptions, and understands that ‘super-description’ is through and through a fantasy, and so on. As with the opening of PI: where there, one’s engagement with the text and one’s learning (about oneself) all depends on and revolves around what one wants out of words like ‘language’, so here, with a word like ‘description’.

What Wittgenstein is after in 501 is that ‘all’ his ‘describings’ can do is to take us back to ourselves, to what we were always doing, and unproblematically so except when confused by theory, by the ideal of science, by superficial analogies between distinct things or forms of words or situations, and so on. One is returned to the practice of language: the ‘law of induction’ drops out of our considerations as irrelevant, and so in effect do weird circumstances which we had not bargained for, unless and until they are apparently actual, in which case we will bargain with them. Our practice of language does not need and is incapable of bolstering or justification by means of a ‘framework’; and we will cross peculiar bridges only if and when we come to them. Consider in this connection OC 617–18:

... doesn’t it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts? (OC 617)

In that case it would seem as if the language-game must ‘show’ the facts that make it possible. (OC 618)

Ineffabilism – the return of the allegedly central concerns of the early philosophy – with a vengeance? So it would seem! Wittgenstein however immediately rather deflates that bubble: ‘But that’s not how it is’. (And he goes on to explain what one had better say instead, in the succeeding paragraphs.)

I have been trying to sketch here the motivation for and the nature of a resolute reading of (in particular) OC 494–501. In the attempt, I hope it has become evident that there is a sense, and indeed a reflexive
sense, in which, when one tries to describe logic – and especially if one
tries to delimit (in advance) when one ‘can’ and ‘can’t’ say certain things,
when they make sense and when not – one rapidly and endlessly mires
oneself in nonsense. Even when one is aware of this, one should be aware
of how one’s own words will almost invariably ‘misfire’, and seem more
like statements or attempts at general truths than one intended.

In *On Certainty*, around 501 for instance, Wittgenstein is not retreating
to a doctrine of the *Tractatus*; he is implying that retreat to such a doc-
trine (a doctrine that he had already overcome in the *Tractatus*) would be
in some ways preferable to the failure to see that there is a real difficulty
here, a difficulty in the status of one’s own remarks, one’s own activity.
Carnapianism – the standard reading of *On Certainty* – fails even to see
the difficulty faced head-on in 501. Wittgenstein sees it clearly, and, I
believe, very much shows the way towards overcoming it. What I have
been seeking to show, in short, is the sense in which Wittgenstein wres-
tled again, in *On Certainty*, with the same problem as that which preoc-
cupied him in the *Tractatus*. It was necessary so to return to this problem
in his later work, because the presentation of it in his earlier work had
evidently been unsatisfactory (pretty much no one had understood it),
and arguably it had in any case included elements of a covert meta-
physics, albeit against his intentions. But would he, in his mature later
(last) work, have gone back on the insights of his earlier work? Would he
have gone back to ineffabilism, itself a moment in the philosophical
dialectic, a rung on the ladder which he had already thrown away?

The real problem with the ineffabilist reading of OC 501 and others
could then be recast as follows: it commits later (latest) Wittgenstein to
a view. Moreover, the view in question is one whose internal contradictions
are pretty plain to see, as they have been plain to most readers of the
*Tractatus*, but not plain to most readers of PI and OC – so anxious are
the latter to race to the (not unreasonable) conclusion that OC can
hardly involve a backsliding from TLP – even if *they are not entitled*, on
their own terms, to that conclusion.

To recap, and close. It is not acceptable to take OC 501 (and 618, and
559, and 455, etc.) as a gesture at the ineffable because it would leave
the later Wittgenstein in the quandary of the *Tractatus* on the ineffabilist
interpretation of that work; gesturing, *in words*, at something it itself
seems to claim cannot be put into words. We must avoid the risk of
thinking that the continuity between early and late Wittgenstein is that
in early Wittgenstein there was just one big description/theory of lan-
guage, and in later Wittgenstein, lots of little ones. Rather, while it is
undoubtedly true that a key change for the better was Wittgenstein’s
opening up to different language-games, and different contexts of use, the questioning of description is a crucial continuity throughout.

Ineffabilism recognizes the limitations of the project of describing our ‘conceptual geography’, our linguistic practices, but tends, as I have shown in this chapter, to harbour still a latent Carnapianism, and to flip-flop between this and a quietistic mysticism. Ineffabilism stays up in the barren heights of abstraction, and thus fails to deal adequately with the pressing issue of self-defeat/self-refutation that never stops threatening it. When a reader of On Certainty (or of any of Wittgenstein’s later writings) speaks of ‘our mutual attunement in concepts’ as if this were a discovery, an important thesis unearthed for us – and not just a fancy way of speaking about utterly mundane facts of child-rearing so on. – then in the end it does not much matter whether they tend in what I have called a ‘Carnpian’ or an ‘ineffabilist’ direction. Wittgenstein, in On Certainty, sees that most of the time there just is not anything that we would be prepared even to count as ‘doubts at bedrock’ – that truly we just do not understand what someone is up to, who comes out with strings of words like ‘I know that I have two hands’ or ‘If I were to doubt that I had two hands, I would have to doubt everything.’ This explains why Wittgenstein’s tone in On Certainty is very frequently one of puzzlement. His readers, on the other hand, have typically seemed remarkably unpuzzled by the doctrines that they have extracted from his work.

I have essayed here a reading of 501 that is consonant with ‘the new Wittgenstein’ interpretation, consonant with the claim that, from at the latest 1918 onwards, Wittgenstein consistently made available philosophical work which is nearly all best read ‘resolutely’. On Certainty 501 is so intriguing because of the way it so explicitly suggests a continuity with Wittgenstein’s early work. I have suggested that we can indeed see here some of Wittgenstein’s ‘first’ thinking of necessity returning again, ‘at the last’. Though, I add, we should see that thinking returning not as ineffabilist, but as ‘resolute’ in intent. Even if 501 – written in the last month of his life – does take one back toward the thinking of 30 or more years earlier, this does not make the ‘first’ and the ‘last’ of Wittgenstein’s thought equivalent. For the question asked in 501 reminds us not of the position Wittgenstein took in the Tractatus, but of the last rung of the ladder, the rung last codified explicitly in that text by 6.522. Nor yet does Wittgenstein in On Certainty or in other last writings make any revolutionary departures from the great thinking (as opposed, we might say, to great thoughts) of the Tractatus or of the Investigations. He simply deepens somewhat an aspect of his thinking already implicit in the early work and clearly present throughout the later work: an emphasis on the
contexts/occasions upon which it is appropriate and indeed sensical to make various utterances and so on.

The standard reading of *On Certainty* takes there to be nothing wrong with the sentence ‘Here is one hand’. That standard reading suggests two things about such a sentence: that one is not allowed to claim to know that there is one hand here; and that only certain quite specific circumstances license one to say so. Neither point is precisely wrong; but neither really sees the deep point, either, of what Wittgenstein is up to. *On Certainty* is the location of some of Wittgenstein’s most acute thinking on the topic of nonsense, and on the concomitant necessity of questioning the very distinctions between ‘syntax’, ‘semantics’ and ‘pragmatics’. For the standard reading in effect turns Wittgenstein’s philosophizing into a branch of pragmatics, and in doing so leans on incoherent Carnapian semantical thinking.²⁵ It fails to stay in touch with a Wittgensteinian understanding of how nonsense occurs.

Nonsense does not arise from putting kosher words together whose meanings ‘clash’. Nor does it arise from putting kosher sentences into contexts with which they ‘clash’. Wittgenstein himself, according to us, the resolute readers of his corpus, is concerned in these his very last writings to get one to understand that a sentence like ‘Here is one hand’ just is not heard by us as meaning anything at all except (potentially) in some actual context of use. It simply ‘stands there’, like a wall decoration. So, it is not exactly that there is anything wrong with the sentence, ‘Here is one hand’ or ‘I am here’, before it is actually employed. And it is not that one or other of sentences such as these should be said to clash with their contexts. It is better to remark, rather – and this is what very few readers of *On Certainty* have (until recently) understood – that it is philosophically a matter of indifference whether we regard one of these strings of words, when considered in isolation from practice, as a part of the language, as a sentence, as meaning anything, at all, or not.

We must look at the practice of language.²⁶

Notes

1. This distinction is made by Moyal-Sharrock in (2002) and (2004b).
2. Although one must, to be fair to the *Tractatus*, concede to it that it was already explicitly aware that language had more than just one function (i.e., more than only the function of ‘description’). For detailed exposition, see Conant (2002) and Floyd (2001).
3. Indeed, one might add to Table 14.1 still a further column labelled perhaps ‘Middle’ or ‘Transitional’, indexing for instance Wittgenstein’s allegedly ‘Verificationist’ phase, where the closeness to Carnap might seem indubitable. (I shall normally use the term ‘later’ in this paper to include all of Wittgenstein’s work from his ‘return to philosophy’ at the end of the 20s.)
4. Wittgenstein wrote to Schlick that he could not ‘imagine that Carnap should have so completely and utterly misunderstood the last sentences of my book – and therefore the fundamental conception of the whole book’. (I take this quote from the epigraph to James Conant (2001); it is taken from a letter to Schlick that Wittgenstein wrote on 8 August 1932.)

5. See for example, his (2000), especially notes 11 and 19.

6. According to ineffabilism, there can be profound nonsense; according to positivism, there can be nonsense that results from putting together the meanings of words (‘symbols’) wrongly.

7. It is important to my suggestion here that Wittgenstein is extremely hesitant to use these terms, and does so only very rarely, and then in a quite peculiar sense(s). Many of his followers, and possibly Heidegger too, are far less hesitant. The ineffabilist is – in my opinion, rightly – keen, rather, to understand Wittgenstein’s hesitancy.

8. Koethe (1996). Another example is recent Mounce (e.g., 2001, p. 192). And, with regard to On Certainty, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock’s Wittgenstein is something of an ineffabilist too.

9. Again, there could easily be a third column added here, for the ‘Third’ or ‘Last’ Wittgenstein. It would, as we shall see below, highlight the unstatability of ‘the total context’ of (proper) utterance, the unstatability (the ‘ineffable truth’) of the so-called framework-propositions, etc.

10. See also her paper in Crary and Read (2000), for a sustained examination of inviolability interpretations of PI. Besides those already mentioned, we can include under this heading (of ‘inviolability’ interpreters of Wittgenstein) such diverse figures (‘foes’ and ‘fans’) as Malcolm, Gellner, Nyiri and Rorty.

11. And they thereby often come to sound alarmingly like proponents of (admittedly non-standard, because the ‘base’-statements of it are so heterogenous, as Wittgenstein continually emphasizes) foundationalism? Moyal-Sharrock, in this volume, and in her (2003) embraces this alarming reading, speaking of Wittgenstein’s ‘glaring foundationalism’. This seems to me especially unwise. Certainly, Wittgenstein sometimes uses the word ‘foundation’ in a somewhat approving sense; consider OC 248: ‘I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. / And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house’, but this remark clearly indicates the kind of ‘foundationalism’ Wittgenstein puts forward. To use remarks like this as the basis for a ‘foundationalism’ is either to risk seriously misleading one’s audience or to be taken in by the most superficial grammatical similarities. It is rather like thinking that the existence of decoy ducks shows that there must be more kinds of duck than we previously realized. A good question to ask of such pro-foundationalist Wittgensteinians (as Crary makes abundantly clear in her essay in this volume), is if and how their view is relevantly different from that of Moore. If such ‘foundationalists’, as Moyal-Sharrock, then shift to claiming to cite or speak of the hinges only as a means of analysing them philosophically, not as a constative move directly against a doubter, the key question then becomes, once again, the question of self-refutation: how can you speak what you have conceded cannot intelligibly be spoken? How are you privileged to talk of things that are forbidden to users of ordinary language, or even (indeed, especially) to those (such as Moore and the sceptic) who you take to ‘violate ordinary language’? To distinguish, as Moyal-Sharrock does in this volume, between ‘speaking’ and ‘saying’ cuts no ice here: Moyal-Sharrock’s claim
that she and her colleagues can *speak* what cannot be *said* (i.e., the hinges, the framework) is nothing more than irresolute special pleading.

12. I mostly use these two words interchangeably, which, while potentially a dubious practice vis-à-vis TLP, is I think harmless when dealing with Wittgenstein’s later writings.

13. The temptation to think that grammatical remarks do succeed in limning language is particularly strong when the very unfortunate term ‘grammatical truth’ is used. This is a misleading or even oxymoronic turn of phrase.

14. I mean here Harold Garfinkel, the founder of the main Wittgensteinian movement in sociology (namely, Ethnomethodology), and his philosophically sophisticated sociological followers. See my (2003) for a discussion of the philosophical relevance of Ethnomethodology.

15. See for instance, Moyal-Sharrock, who believes Wittgenstein to be an ineffabilist foundationalist, and who takes ‘the framework’ to be unsayable, but yet says quite a lot about it. It is, I think, very clear that only super-descriptions (or even ‘super-facts’) will do that trick.

16. See the series of papers by Baker in *Language and Communication* over the last few years leading up to his recent tragic death. These papers (Baker 1998, 1999, 2001) constitute, I believe, a serious bulwark of support for and expansion of the therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein, and resolutely oppose the Wittgenstein of the mainstream, which includes here Hacker, Johnston, Malcolm, Pears, Moyal-Sharrock, and to some extent Marie McGinn.

17. Here, an important point, first made I think by Stanley Cavell, is that ‘presentation’ is in any case probably a better translation than ‘representation’ – and is less likely to incline one toward the fantasy of super-description that I am warning against.


20. See for example the *Tractatus* discussion, and p. 138 of Diamond (2001): ‘[Wittgenstein] was convinced early in his life that the law of identity could only by a kind of illusion be taken to be a substantial law, a law with content and metaphysical implications; he was convinced too that the idea of identity as a relation is confused.’ See also PI 216.

21. See for example, TLP 6.2322.

22. See my (1996) for explication. (One major reason why I find it misleading to speak of so-called hinge ‘propositions’ as ‘rules of grammar’, then, is that it is not at all clear what if anything it can mean to act upon (or from) one of them. Whereas there is a perfectly good sense in which rules of grammar in the ordinary sense can be acted upon, in certain circumstances (e.g., of confusion concerning some point of English grammar)).

23. The ‘resolute’ reading of Wittgenstein does not presuppose that Wittgenstein was always successfully resolute, and post-metaphysical.

24. Though what I have essayed is not well described as a view. I have only responded in the negative to others’ views, and intimated by contrast something that is no view, but only the actual practice of language-use of conversation or of speaking, as Rhees might have put it.

25. Both these (in this case, connected) charges are made good in Conant (1998). See especially pp. 226–7 and 239.
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